

BLOOD BIKER CONTINUES TO ROLL WITH IT!

Dying twice in the back of an ambulance made an emergency medical volunteer want to give back to those who helped to keep him alive and to the wider community. Following extensive rehabilitation and having to retire from work due to his ongoing heart concerns, Fergus Lennon tells Sarah Murphy that he could not just sit back and do nothing!

Fergus Lennon (60) from Newbridge, Co Kildare had a massive heart attack at home and stopped breathing twice in the back of an ambulance as it arrived at Naas General Hospital.

Fourteen years later, Mr Lennon is now the director of Blood Bikes Leinster/ Medical Transport, which transports items such as blood products, organ donation tissue, breast milk and other vital medical equipment from one hospital to another across Dublin, Kildare, Laois, Kilkenny, Meath and Westmeath. This work is done entirely on a voluntary basis and all within a budget of €25,000.

"In the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) I could hear people saying I had only 24 hours to live. I wasn't ready to die and everything in life changes for a reason," explained the father-of-five.

At the age of 46, after extensive rehabilitation and having to retire from work due to his ongoing heart concerns, Mr Lennon says he could not just sit back and do nothing. "Doctors encouraged me to look after myself more, but to also engage in something I was interested in and meet more people, as I was going out of my mind not doing anything.

"That's when my love of motorbikes took over again. At the age of 16 I got my first bike and since then I've always had one. The need to give back to those who kept me alive, and help those who require emergency medical treatment, along with my love for motorbikes led me to get involved with Blood Bikes East in 2012."

HOSPITAL TRANSFERS

The following year Lennon saw that there was no such service provided in Leinster, and decided to start up his own division with the help of some other volunteer medical bikers. "They are now the green and yellow coloured motorbikes and vans you see



Fergus Lennon, who won a Hidden Hero Award in 2016, received a 'heart check-up' he launched last year's awards, which were established in 2011 to honour those who have made a significant contribution to their community, workplace, family or through sporting accomplishments.

on the roads across much of Leinster," he says.

"I approached a few guys who had done some work with Blood Bikes East in the past and they were willing to give my idea a go. We bought two second-hand motorbikes for €5,000 each that had been used by the Metropolitan Police in the UK. We also approached Naas General Hospital, because that is where I wanted to firstly pilot the idea, as without staff there and the paramedics I wouldn't be alive and I needed to show my appreciation.

"So, hospital management were keen to give the idea a go and since then it has grown. We now deal with additional hospitals such as Tallaght, Portlaoise, Navan, and Mullingar. There are very sound service level agreements in place with all of the hospitals."

BLOOD BIKE DIVISIONS

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He points out that Blood Bikes receive no government funding or intervention for what is an essential lifesaving service. "Our vehicles are seen regularly travelling up and down motorways from hospital to hospital, attending events and fundraising at shopping centres throughout Ireland.

"When people see our vehicles their first impression is they are state or HSE-owned vehicles until they speak to the volunteers. Each and every group must maintain, equip and run their own group by fundraising, 100% of everything collected is put back into maintaining and running this service. Therefore, we are solely reliant on donations, sponsorship and fundraising."

24-HOUR SERVICE IN NAAS

A 24-hour service is also provided at Naas General Hospital by Fergus Lennon given his affiliation with medical staff working there. "We now also offer a GP service to seven practices on Fridays in Naas helping to deliver medical samples and supplies following a successful pilot programme. That part of our service is now running five years.

"Obviously the service we provide has expanded but we survive on a shoe string and there's no denying it is extremely difficult trying to deal with finances and all the issues that come with that," revealed Mr Lennon.

The majority of the motor bikes and vehicles which are two vans are stored at Mr Lennon's home as he has expanded his garages for storage.

They also have a small office at Naas General Hospital but it is hardly ever used because the volunteers are continuously on the road.



Pictured at the Hidden Hero Awards 2019 launch were children from Junior Genius Forest School in Baldonnell, Co Dublin, dressed as their favourite superheroes alongside Fergus Lennon and his fellow Blood Bike Leinster volunteer Sharon Percival, who is the only female biker in the division.



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"The working overheads are kept down to the minimum. I got rid of my garden at the house and replaced it with cement so to enable the storage of necessary equipment and vehicles.

"On the administration front, we use google documents so everyone, no matter where they live, can access any administrative documents they will need and there is also a WhatsApp group. I put up a roster at the start of each year and volunteers fill up the hours or days they think they will be able to do. All of the phone-calls I pay for myself.

"We normally cover the hours from 7pm to 7am and when we can we will try to provide a service during the day. However, many of the hospitals use a payment service during daylight hours for deliveries. Saying that, we never turn down a job."

NO SHORTAGE OF VOLUNTEER DRIVERS

He says that there's never a problem getting volunteers to help with driving duties. "Thankfully we now have 20 men and five women driving for us. We will never turn down more volunteers for driving duties but we want those aged over 40 or who have retired, love to drive and want to give back to the community when it comes to medical needs.

"We are short on people shaking donation buckets and trying to raise money for us. Bar having our driving insurance looked after by Carole Nash Insurance (the motorbike insurance specialists), we don't receive funding from any organisation, including the HSE."

He claims that the extra funding or some sort of sponsorship would be a big help to the Blood Bikes, and would go some way towards relieving a massive amount of financial pressure. "We keep running costs as low as we possibly can. The majority of our vehicles, which are all second hand, have 482,000km on the clock, and one definitely needs to be replaced. However, we simply cannot afford it. The youngest vehicle in operation is 11-years-old. We own all the vehicles ourselves, so sponsorship would be a big help in some regard."

The Director of Blood Bikes Leinster, who was awarded a Hidden Hero award in 2016 in recognition of his efforts, says that he doesn't do this voluntary job

for the glory and attention.

"I just do it to help because I needed it 14 years ago, and who knows when I or someone I know may need it again in the future. None of us know being honest about it".

Companies or organisations who may wish to donate, sponsor goods or services can contact 085-8133075; email info@bloodbikes.ie or visit <http://bloodbikes.ie/contact/>

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