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Owen O'Driscoll with one of his paintings he did at Headway.

My new lease of life after having stroke

By Chris Dunne

TEN years ago, Owen and Betty O'Driscoll were motoring away nicely.

Everything they held dear was close at hand at their home on the Commons Road.

Owen whiled away hours in his workshop, working as a motor mechanic near the couple's magnificent flower garden, where he enjoyed the chat about cars and engines with his customers. Spending time with the grandchildren was always precious.

"And we always loved going on holidays to Italy," says Betty. "Italy was always one of our favourite places.

"Now we go on holidays to Valentia in Kerry."

There was no indication that life for the O'Driscolls was about to change forever one Saturday in November a decade ago, when Owen suffered a stroke.

"Owen decided he wasn't going to work that morning," says Betty, recalling that fateful day as if it were yesterday.

"He wanted to decorate the trees with fairy-lights for the grand-children.

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"At about 11am he came in for a sandwich and he was complaining of a headache. He took two paracetamol before going for a rest.

"Later that evening, I went to Mass and I dropped Owen to the local pub for his usual Saturday night tipple.

"We got a takeaway later and we put on the TV to watch Casualty, which ended up being a strange co-incidence.

"I do remember making a comment about the programme and Owen never answered me.

"Looking back, the small signs added up."

Betty was unaware of it, but later that night, her husband would suffer a stroke, culminating in Owen being admitted to the Mercy Hospital.

"Looking back, the small signs were leading up to the incident," says Betty.

"When Owen couldn't speak, I called our son, Gavin, who called South Doc.

"The ambulance was called and the paramedics were great, they kept reassuring us," says Betty.

"In the hospital, Owen seemed back to himself and he walked into the room to the neurologist. I thought; are we imagining all this?"

But they weren't. A scan revealed that Owen, aged 59, had suffered a stroke.

"He couldn't speak or swallow," says Betty. "It was frightening.

"Owen had stents in his heart and he had epilepsy, so the drugs he could take were restricted."



Owen and Betty O'Driscoll. Owen had a stroke 10 years ago and has attended Headway since learning to bake and paint.

His movement was restricted.

"The movement in his feet was affected," says Betty.

"He just shuffled to the bathroom."

Betty found it hard to take in.

"Even though his comprehension was very bad, he understood what I was saying to him," says Betty.

"When I spoke to him, he squeezed my hand."

Owen wanted his loved ones close to him.

"He was nervous and somebody stayed with him in hospital 24/7."

How did he communicate with his loved ones?

"When he couldn't get some of the words out, he drew a picture. When he wanted something, he looked at it. When I gave him the item, like a jar of coffee, I asked him what he wanted to do with it.

"As time went on, after a week or so, he could get some of the words out. The therapist was happy with him."

Owen, always chatty and full of life, lost some of his confidence after his stroke.

"If we were out shopping and we met somebody, he would just nudge me," says Betty. "He had no confidence."

When Owen's daughter-in-law, Aideen, introduced the couple to Headway, the organisation which supports people living with acquired brain injury, Owen slowly began to re-gain his lost confidence. And he got the confidence to spread his wings.

"Because of Owen's epileptic seizures he was never on his own," says Betty.

"We enjoy each other's company. The first day Owen went to Headway, it was like the first day going to school. I looked at the phone all day."

"I'm a home-bird," says Owen. "After the stroke, I employed a mechanic; a lovely lad. We got on very well."

And Owen got on very well at Headway, learning to paint and to bake, his culinary efforts even out-doing his wife's simply delicious cakes!

"Owen can make a super-light sponge cake filled with fresh strawberries and cream," says Betty.

"Before, he couldn't boil an egg! Now he can make a fabulous almond and orange cake!"

Too many cooks don't spoil the broth at Headway.

"The clients all wear their white coats while cooking. They all work together on Tuesday mornings and they all sit down and dine together enjoying the dishes they created. It's something different every week."

What is Owen's secret to his super-light sponge?

"Whisking the eggs and butter together for a long time," says Owen.

He acquired another skill. The sitting in room in the O'Driscoll home is adorned with Owen's paintings and sketches.

"The first Christmas after he got the stroke, our other son, Chris, got Owen painting materials. He thought painting would strengthen Owen's hand. The stroke took away his ability to read."

It turned out Owen was a natural as an artist.

"He had an art exhibition three years ago in CUH!" says Betty.

Sarah, the art teacher at Headway, encouraged and motivated him.

"Owen took pictures with the camera of the flowers outside and then he painted them. The pictures are fabulous."

It is fabulous that Owen, who loved his work as a motor mechanic, found other pursuits to enjoy after he suffered a stroke.

"Not being able to work after the stroke was a terrible blow for Owen," says Betty.

"He found that very hard to accept.

"That was nearly the worst part for him. He was fed-up and a bit down. He slept a lot.

"The psychologist at Headway helped Owen come to terms with not working. He told Owen, 'You still have your garage'."

He was still the boss.

"Ger, our new mechanic, was brilliant," says Betty.

"And Owen still tinkered away outside, tidying away tools and equipment. He had a purpose."

Owen thought the world of Ger.

"I had a great business and Ger was with us three years before we closed," says Owen.

"I couldn't praise him highly enough."

The O'Driscolls can't praise Headway highly enough either.

"I never knew about the amazing work they do until Owen had a stroke," says Betty.

"Owen attends Headway four days a week.

"I'm delighted to get involved and help with their fund-raisers. Currently, Headway are fund-raising for their new premises in Carrigrohane Road.

"I'm always asking people for money!"

Betty is helping a cause that is close to her heart, that helped her husband when he most needed help.

"The team at Headway treat each individual as a person; not as a brain injury. Everyone is treated equally. Everyone has a voice."

Everyone can move on after suffering a stroke or acquired brain injury.

"At the start, Owen had no outlook. He thought there was nothing there for him," says Betty.

"Headway changed all that. Now he goes places, he goes out for breakfast every Saturday with Gavin.

"Yes, he gets tired and needs to sleep more, but he lives a normal life. And he loves going on outings with Headway.

"One of his favourite things is browsing around the English Market."

Owen has acquired a taste for new dishes.

"I love lamb's hearts with hot chilli sauce!" he says, showing me the sauce bottle. "You must try it!"

Owen might get small words mixed up, but he can easily remember the recipe for lamb's heart and hot chilli sauce.

"And get the bacon ribs as well when you go to the English Market!" he advises.

Jovial and animated, he is still the Owen that Betty married 47 years ago.

"He is still Owen, apart from very minor details," says Betty.

"And it's because of Headway that Owen is as good as he is now.

"After the stroke, we thought life could never be the same again," says Betty.

"You think life is over. It's not. It's just changed."

Some things never change.

"Owen still services my car for me!"

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