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The Kilkenny taxi driver whose drive and initiative has saved many lives

Sylvia Thompson

Each driver goes around the spots in their area where people go to take their own lives

Kilkenny taxi driver Derek Devoy set up a Taxi Watch suicide prevention initiative in Kilkenny in November, 2014. He developed the service after saving three people from taking their own lives in Kilkenny City.

Since then, more than 200 people have been pulled back from taking their own lives in Kilkenny alone.

Taxi drivers in counties Carlow, Clare, Cork, Dublin, Limerick, Louth, Mayo, Tipperary, Waterford and Wexford have joined the scheme, with the men and women looking out for and helping people in distress while on night shifts.

Each taxi driver who joins Taxi Watch does a HSE-funded course to give them the skills to talk to people they save from suicide attempts. In Kilkenny, Taxi Watch has teamed up the Teac Tom, a voluntary organisation which offers free counseling to anyone with mental health problems.

1) What is your proudest achievement?

"Setting up Taxi Watch has got to be it. Although I set it up, I couldn't have done it without everyone else. We now have 175 drivers across Ireland. In each case, we had to find people who cared as much as I do about saving people's lives. Each taxi driver drives around the spots in their area where people go to take their own lives.

"In Kilkenny, I drive out to the car parks in nearby woods and along the river to the bridges that people choose to throw themselves off. No one is looking into the water at 3am in the morning for the right reasons. For young men, deciding to take their own lives is such a split-second decision and the more people we can save the better."

2) What motivates you

in your work and life?

"On a personal level, I am motivated by my

wife, Sharon and children, Cian (12) and Emma (9). I love getting hugs from my children. Saving people from taking their own lives helps me get out of bed in the morning. Every day, I know there are people in absolute agony. I went through four years of chronic depression myself so I know what it feels like. In 2010, I broke my back in a car crash.

"I had four operations and now have six screws and two metal rods in my back. I felt completely and utterly useless. Not having money coming in made me feel worthless. I spent eight months in my bedroom. I used to get up out of bed in the morning when my wife was going to work and the children were going to school and then I would get back into bed until they were due home."

3) What do you do to keep mind and body healthy and well?

"I love listening to music and going to gigs. I can sit forever but I can't walk for any distance because of my back. I try to go swimming about once a week."

4) What are the most important factors to maintain a healthy society?

"Educating children in primary school about their mental health. Children need to know how their heads work, that it's okay to feel bad and ask for help. It's too late to teach teenagers not to bottle things up. They have to learn it at an earlier age."

5) What needs to be done in Ireland to achieve this?

"Teachers need to be trained to teach children mental health skills. Teachers and the gardaí also need training to deal with people who are suicidal. It takes great courage

to ask someone if he or she is thinking about taking his/her own lives."

6) What do you think is the most pressing health issue in Ireland today?

"Mental health problems and the pressures young people are under. Lots of teen-

agers aren't telling their parents the pressures they are under and schools aren't dealing with it.

"Students are taking drugs to get through exams and almost everyone we save late at night has taken a lot of alcohol. It's very rare nowadays to meet a family without some mental health problems. Depression is as common as a cold."

7) How do you think the Minister for Health needs to tackle this?

"I'd like to see Taxi Watch in every county in Ireland. I think there still needs to be more awareness of how to help people with depression. It's important not to say things like "get a grip". I send everyone videos from the Black Dog Institute in Australia because I think they are very helpful. And, I give talks and show school children our documentary, *Throline*."

8) What do you do to relax and unwind?

"I love watching TV and going to the cinema. I don't drink much. My wife and I go out for meals together."

9) What makes you laugh?

"Comedy, particularly stand-up comedy. We've the Cat Laughs Festival in Kilkenny which is great. I even watch comedy on my iPad when waiting at the taxi rank."

10) Where would you like to live other than Ireland and why?

"New York. I used to go on shopping trips

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before the car crash. I still love going there. It's the place where things happen.
"In December, I visited New York to talk to the Yellow Cabs drivers about setting up Taxi Watch there in 2018. Taxi drivers in Belfast will also come on board this year."



New series

They stand beside the most vulnerable in our society – travelling the tough long, journeys with those struck by illness, disease and accidents. They are our Health Heroes.

Usually in the background, these heroes save the State a fortune, financially, by offering care, expertise and logistics. And, also of high value, they provide kindness and comfort to those under their care.

Each Tuesday, in *Health+Family*, we will honour one of the people deserving of the hero tag. If you would like to nominate someone, go to irishtimes.com/healthheroes

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