

By MAEVE
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CHRISTINA McDonald was 19 when she started complaining of numbness and pins and needles in her leg.

'I had pins and needles and numbness in my left leg and left foot and because I was young doctors assumed it was some kind of physical issue,' says Christina.

'Doctors said it was my sciatic nerve and I just didn't think much of it — at 19 I just went along with it. I was taking medication for it and it was giving me bother on and off for a year or two and then it went away.'

It wasn't until she was 26 that Christina's symptoms came back all of a sudden and her worsening condition told doctors that something more serious was the matter.

'I had really bad symptoms that severely impacted me. I knew there was something really wrong and I needed to go to hospital,' explains the 33-year-old from Drogheda in Co Louth.

'I was in work and I had pins and needles in my left foot — again, initially I thought nothing of it as I expected it was the sciatica. I went to bed and woke up the next day and I had numbness in my left arm and left leg. I went to work and started to feel this funny sensation coming over me where I couldn't control my left arm or my left leg so essentially I was paralysed down the left side.'

'I was having these weird body movements and when these attacks were happening my speech was all slurred. I went to my GP who sent me straight up to Beaumont Hospital and I was kept in for a week and a half.'

Christina was tested for a number of conditions and multiple sclerosis (MS) was the diagnosis she eventually received.

MS is an autoimmune condition whereby the immune system attacks the layer that surrounds and protects the nerves called the myelin sheath.

This damages and scars the sheath, and potentially the underlying nerves, meaning that messages travelling along the nerves become slowed or disrupted. Exactly what causes the immune system to act in this way is unclear. There are two different types of MS, relapsing remitting MS and progressive MS.

Today is World MS Day and as part of the event, Christina's photograph, along with seven others of MS sufferers from across Ireland, will be on display at St Stephen's Green Shopping Centre as part of a campaign by MS Ireland and Novartis to raise awareness of

With Multiple Sclerosis IT'S NOT ONE SIZE FITS ALL

As World MS Day falls today, sufferers want to help people understand more about the condition...

the illness and the developments which have taken place over the past number of years.

This year marks 28 years since people living with MS in Ireland were first offered access to potentially life-changing disease-modifying treatment.

Over the past three decades thousands of people's lives have been impacted by the developments in treatments, therapies and groundbreaking research and development that have changed the face of MS.

During this time, important milestones have been reached in improving the quality of life of MS patients, mainly by developing innovative treatment therapies that reduce the progression of disability.

The exhibition will be unveiled in the shopping centre today and aims to also highlight the work of Novartis in delivering innovative treatments that improve the lives of patients worldwide across different stages of the journey with MS.

And for Christina, the initial shock has been dissipated by the realisation that her MS had gone undiagnosed for a number of years.

'It just made sense because of course it was MS,' she says. 'It was a bit of a shock because it was almost like the symptoms came out of the blue. They were similar to a stroke but I knew I wasn't having a stroke.'

Christina has now been in remission for four years and one of the things she struggles with is that, because she looks OK, people sometimes don't believe that she has the condition.

'I have nerve damage but I am able to walk. My mobility is not really impacted at all any more. Any time someone has a relapse you recover but you don't recover 100 per cent but thanks to my treatment regime I'd say I have recovered 95 per

People might say 'you don't look sick'

cent. I have bad days where my fatigue is bad or I have nerve pain and memory issues but other than that I am very lucky.'

Christina says she is grateful she lives at a time when treatment for the condition is constantly moving forward so she keeps as well as she can. She is hoping to get back to work soon.

'I am unemployed at the minute but I went for a job interview last week,' she says.

'In one sense it knocked my confidence because when I was diagnosed I went from two jobs to one job to nothing. Someone with MS might be OK a week later or a month later and for others it might take longer. I am in a good space mentally and physically right now.'

Christina is hoping the exhibition will help people realise that everyone with MS is different.

'The project will show different faces of MS as there isn't one size fits all. People might say to me 'You don't look sick' and they have different perceptions of what MS is. I think this campaign will help give people a better understanding of it.'

Christina is also among a number of people with MS who write a blog for MS Ireland.

'We all have had different journeys. People with MS can live full and varied lives, you just have to live a bit differently.'

For more see ms-society.ie.



Enjoying life: Christina is well and fit following her MS diagnosis

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wonderful day. And all the kids got on great, too.'

James adds: 'When we met, we had a hug straight away, and it felt so natural. Kate and Florence went off and started playing.'

'There weren't any tears, we were just all so pleased to see each other. I did wonder if Kate would look ill, and it was so lovely to see how healthy she looked.'

They met up again at Christmas 'and played board games and went for a lovely walk', says James.

The families met up again at Easter, and

Jane and Lesley have been invited to James and Jenny's wedding in July. 'We have a friendship for life,' says James.

'When I see photos of us together, it seems so poignant that a connection between donor and recipient such as Kate and myself affects so many people around us. It's like the ripples on a pond.'

Psychologist Wendy Dignan says it can prove helpful for recipient and donor families to meet. 'Donors and recipients can experience uncertainty, anxiety and feel a responsibility to recover,' she explains.

But good social support can help — 'this

little girl has that support from her family, but the fact she is building a relationship with her donor enhances that protective factor.'

'Separately, donors often suffer with feelings of responsibility and worry if it's worked, and how the recipient is doing,' she says, adding that 'this pair are uniquely placed' for coping with any anxiety that they may experience. It is clear that they have a unique relationship. As James puts it: 'We have a special bond, so I now worry about Kate as much as I do my own family.'

As a result of the treatments she's been through, Kate, now ten, struggles with

anaemia and needs to have her blood levels monitored weekly.

She is also smaller than her twin sister and is unlikely to go through puberty.

Jane says: 'She's struggling at school because she missed so much. But she's very positive and she adores playing with her friends and sister.'

As for the man who helped make that possible, Jane says: 'James and his family will be in our lives for ever. He saved our daughter — and to have found a wonderful friendship on top of that is fantastic.'

■ TO FIND out about becoming a donor in Ireland, go to <https://www.giveblood.ie/find-a-clinic/register-interest/>