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It's time to focus on Ireland's volunteers!

Claire Byrne launches the 2009 Ireland Involved Awards with Specsavers

THE time has come to recognise the volunteers in our communities as today, Monday 27 July, Volunteering Ireland and Newstalk's Claire Byrne launch the 2009 Ireland Involved Awards with Specsavers. Claire is joined by last year's winner Marie Carroll, and the young athletes from Bayside Gymnastics as they start the search for remarkable unsung heroes of your community. Aimed at showcasing the work of volunteers across Ireland, today is about focusing on celebrating Ireland's volunteers.

The Ireland Involved Awards with Specsavers is an awards scheme that makes a difference. The awards will honour ten individuals, in ten different categories, on a national stage. One of those ten will then be selected to go on and represent Ireland at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France on Saturday 5 December 2009, which is International Volunteer Day.

Volunteering Ireland and Specsavers aim for Irish Volunteers to be seen and acknowledged for their continuous efforts within their communities. The Ireland Involved Awards is the only place where volunteers can receive comprehensive, national recognition.

'The Ireland Involved awardees are ordinary people who do extraordinary things. They are people of courage, determination, passion, commitment, hunger for justice, hunger for change. They are the ones who are prepared to put their time and energies where their values and convictions lie. They are the change-makers, role models, advocates, the ones who bear witness, the ones who don't give up, and we badly need their stories to be told so that the message can go out that our actions matter and that we can all make a positive difference in the lives of one another and the world we live in,' comments Elaine Bradley, CEO Volunteering Ireland

With 34 stores nationwide, Specsavers is very much a part of the community it operates in. Owned and run by local opticians and business professionals, Specsavers will be asking their customers to focus on the search to find volunteers who have touched both the people they work with and the communities in which they operate.

Hugh Morris, the chairman of Specsavers in Ireland, says: *'Being Irish business owners, the Specsavers store directors in Ireland understand the importance of their local communities. At Specsavers, we aim to go the extra mile, offering customers the most professional eyecare and value-for-money frames, so there's a definite synergy to being part of an initiative that rewards individuals for going the extra mile...day in, day out.'*

Entering a colleague, friend or family member is simple. Call into any of the 34 Specsavers stores in Ireland for an entry form. To locate your nearest store visit www.specsavers.ie or nominate online at www.irelandinvolved.ie. Closing date for entries is the 11 September 2009.

Ten awardees will be selected from each category and will be honoured at an awards event on Thursday 5 November, at a dinner hosted by the Taoiseach's Office in the Royal Hospital Kilmainham, Dublin. President Mary McAleese will be joining the host Claire Byrne and will present the overall award to the 2009 Irish Volunteer of the Year.

- Ends -

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Identifying a nominee:

If you *know someone* or indeed *are* someone who ticks any of the below boxes, please enter! We want to celebrate THEIR work and achievements:

- Volunteers for a community group or charity on an on-going basis
- Contributes to the organisation in a meaningful and practical way
- Gives up personal time for the benefit of others in an unpaid role
- Makes a difference in the community and world around them

The Categories:

- Arts, Culture & Media
- Health & Disability
- Children & Young People
- Campaigning & Awareness Raising
- i-Care About My Community
- Education & Training
- Social Work
- Animals & Environment
- International Development
- Sports & Recreation

Specsavers notes to editors

- Specsavers has 34 stores in Ireland.
- Specsavers was founded by Doug and Dame Mary Perkins in 1984 and is now the largest privately owned opticians in the world
- The couple still run the company, along with their three children. Their eldest son John is joint managing director
- Specsavers has more than 1,340 stores throughout the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Spain and Australia
- Annual turnover for the Specsavers Group is forecast to reach a record £1.4 billion in 2009
- The group plans to continue its successful international expansion by opening stores in New Zealand
- Specsavers optical stores and hearing centres are owned and run by joint venture or franchise partners.
- Specsavers employs more than 26,000 staff
- Specsavers was voted Britain's most trusted brand of opticians for the eighth year running by Reader's Digest in 2009
- Greater than one in three people who wear glasses in the UK buy them from Specsavers * – nine and a half million glasses were exported from the warehouse to stores in 2008
- Specsavers is the largest retail provider of home delivery contact lenses in Europe and one of the top two retail suppliers of continuous wear lenses in the world
- Specsavers is now the largest retail dispenser of digital hearing aids in the UK and offer a hearing service from more than 400 locations.

- Specsavers supports numerous optical and hearing charities, including Diabetes UK, for whom they have raised more than £250,000 to fund research into diabetic retinopathy
- Since 2003 more than a quarter of a million glasses have been collected and recycled by Specsavers stores for Vision Aid Overseas for use in developing countries

*GfK Home Audit (Dec 2008)