

## Individual Disabled/Deaf Artists (iDA) Awards<sup>1</sup>: A Case Study of Maurice Orr

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The Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI)



*“The University of the Atypical has been so good to me. I wouldn’t have this career without them, and I try to encourage other people: ‘for goodness sake go and talk to people, get out there, and do it’.” (Maurice Orr, September 2018)*

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**All photographs used courtesy of Donal McCann, Paintings - Zoe Gaston**

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<sup>1</sup> Formerly the Arts & Disability Awards Ireland (ADAI)

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## 1. Introduction

**Maurice Orr is a globally renowned artist**, whose work is exhibited in private and public collections around the world. A recipient of an Individual Disabled/Deaf Artists (iDA) Award in 2002, Maurice has gone on to achieve other prestigious international bursaries and commissions including a ten-week attachment to the BANFF centre of Art in Canada. In 2010 Maurice was one of 29 artists with disabilities commissioned via the Unlimited scheme of the Organising Committee of the 2012 Olympiad and Paralympic Games to create work embodying the values of the games. ‘The Screaming Silence of the Wind’ is a stunning and inventive series of five paintings using oils and fish leathers, which celebrate the landscapes of Iceland and Northern Ireland. In recognition of his Olympic triumph Maurice was subsequently awarded two bursaries to complete artistic residencies and collaborations on Vancouver Island and in Whitehorse, Canada.

A visual artist, Maurice works on vast canvases measuring up to seven feet. The Cultural Olympiad work was exhibited in the Southbank, London and a piece purchased by a private buyer and Gifted to the National Trust was put on permanent display at the Giants Causeway visitor centre. His work is much sought after and has also been purchased by the likes of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

What makes Maurice’s achievement most impressive is that his career as an artist is relatively recent. Although he always enjoyed painting, it was 2002 and aged in his late forties before Maurice saw himself as an artist. He has been selling his work commercially for less than four years. A major, life-changing illness which resulted in unemployment and despair was the catalyst to Maurice first reaching out to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Maurice credits the Arts Council and the University of the Atypical as helping him develop the confidence to pursue his life’s dream.

**This case study charts Maurice’s journey and the transformative impact that the iDA grant has had on his life and career.** It draws on a two-hour interview with Maurice at his studio in Armoy, during which he gave generously and courageously of himself, to share his story. His goal to inspire other aspiring artists to —“Just go and do it. If you don’t talk to people nothing is going to happen.”

## Figure (1) The Giant's Causeway



"The Giants Causeway" 5'x7' oils and fish leather on Irish Linen is one of the five paintings that Maurice Orr was commissioned to do by the London Organising Committee of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games

## 2. The iDA (Individual Disabled/Deaf Artists) Awards

The iDA (Individual Disabled/Deaf Artists) Awards is a flagship programme funded by the Arts Council and managed by the University of the Atypical. The iDA award is aimed at promoting equity for deaf and disabled artists in Northern Ireland<sup>2</sup>. The 1995 Disability Discrimination Act and Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) provide statutory instruments for the protection of rights of people with disabilities. All public authorities are required to produce an action plan under Section 49B of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The Arts Council's Disability Action Plan demonstrates how the Arts Council proposes to fulfil its statutory obligations to: promote positive attitudes towards people with disabilities; and encourage participation by people with disabilities in public life. The iDA Award forms part of the Arts Council's Disability Action Plan.

*“Aren't disabled artists just “artists”? Well, yes and no. All artists are artists – and in a perfect world, no one would need to take on a label just to gain funding, find a way in or get taken seriously. But that's currently not the case and by identifying positively, it could be argued that disabled artists can gain a voice and a platform that can push them further, faster.” (Verrent, 2015)*

As eloquently described by Verrent, a senior producer at Unlimited and a disabled person herself, overcoming the disadvantages that disabled artists face requires interventions that help strengthen their voice, visibility, confidence, and that ameliorate obstacles to participation. The equity focused iDA Awards are targeted at deaf and disabled artists working across a range of art forms. The iDA supports artists to develop their artistic careers by enabling them to produce high quality work or gain new experiences by travelling, accessing tuition and/or professional mentoring. The scheme is open to individual artists and partnerships at various stages in their professional career and both emerging and established artists are eligible for the scheme. Applicants can request up to £5,000 and are coached on an individual basis to submit eligible proposals. Applications are assessed by a panel composed of disabled/deaf artists and representatives of the Arts Council and University of Atypical. Successful applicants are supported individually towards the

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<sup>2</sup> Established in 2001 as the Arts & Disability Awards Ireland scheme, the iDA awards have been managed by the University of the Atypical, a disabled/deaf led arts company formed in 1993 as the Arts & Disability Forum.

completion of their projects. Applicants whose proposals were not selected for funding are given individualised feedback from the panel and all artists receive individual coaching and support from the team at University of the Atypical. Some artists are successful in obtaining more than one grant and where applicable artists are encouraged in to move laterally or upwards from University of Atypical iDA Awards to apply for funding directly from the Arts Council and other agencies.

In 2016-17 there were 19 artists with disabilities involved in the iDA programme with awards made to 14 of those artists. The following year, 2017-18, the number of artists involved with the iDA programme had increased to 37, with 13 receiving awards. The programme appears to impact positively on the artistic capacity and professional profile of disabled artists. Two out of the four Major Individual Artist (MIA) awards made by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland in 2017 went to artists with disabilities who had previously been supported via iDA<sup>3</sup>. The MIA awards form part of the wider Support for the Individual Artist Programme (SIAP) which is administered annually by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland as part of its continuing commitment to supporting the development of individual artists. The Arts Council made 192 SIAP awards to individual artists in 2018/19 totalling £533,000.

Several disabled artists in receipt of iDA Awards have achieved international recognition for their work: Maurice Orr is one such artist. This case-study was commissioned by the Arts Council to illustrate the range of methods it currently uses to promote positive attitudes and encourage greater participation in arts and culture by people with disabilities.

## 3. Case Study Design

### 3.1 Purpose of the Case Study

The purpose of the case study was to:

- (1) illustrate the contribution of iDA Awards in enabling artists to develop artistic practice, self-confidence and wellbeing;
- (2) identify how iDA Awards have contributed to the creation of a more inclusive and diverse arts and culture sector; and

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<sup>3</sup> This prestigious award is made to only a small number of artists each year. The awards, funded through National Lottery, make it possible for chosen artists to produce a substantial, ambitious project that will make a significant contribution to the development of their artistic careers.

(3) identify how iDA Awards have contributed towards breaking down stigma, preconceptions and prejudice towards disabled/deaf people in Northern Ireland.

## 3.2 Methods

The case study approach was used to explore the contribution and impact of the iDA Award scheme to the artistic practice, self-confidence and wellbeing. The case study uses the artist's story to illuminate the disadvantages that artists with disabilities experience and the role of iDA in helping the ACNI meet its Section 75 obligations. The single case study approach yields rich insights and learning which could be used to inform future policy decisions.

Maurice Orr was identified as a potential case study in a meeting with ACNI and the University of Atypical. He was approached in the first instance by the Chief Executive of the University of Atypical and readily accepted the invitation to participate in the study.

Maurice was interviewed in his studio in Armoy on September 24th, 2018. A semi-structured interview guide afforded Maurice the flexibility to talk about the things that he felt were important, while still retaining focus on iDA. With Maurice's written consent the two-hour interview was recorded. He was provided with a draft copy of this report to confirm accuracy and amend where appropriate.

## 4. Life before the iDA Award

### 4.1 Dreams and aspirations

*"From a very young child, I can't remember a time when I wasn't drawing or pushing paint." (Maurice Orr)*

Art has always been a part of Maurice's life. As a schoolboy in Ballymena he harboured dreams of becoming an interior designer. Getting to art college proved to be a challenge but he got there. Nevertheless, destiny and responsibilities intervened, and he left art college, before completing his studies, to join the Civil Service.

*"I'm very lucky, very, very, lucky to have this career. After leaving school I had originally applied for art college; I messed up an English O'Level and you needed English and maths to get in. I'd been at the secondary school not the grammar school but had to go back to the grammar schools to take the resit. I was*



*traveling every day from Ballymena to Ballymoney. Mr Reynolds was a joy. He let me back into school even with long hair and the beard – I was ready to go into art college! Got the qualification I needed but missed out; I couldn't join the art college partway through the year and had to reapply. Lucky enough I did get in the next year. But halfway through I gave up; I think I was one year away from finishing, but I was married at the time, I had to work and needed money. You do things you have to do. I joined the Civil Service. Basically, an admin post."*

In the Civil Service Maurice was once again drawn to the creative side of things and worked within graphic design. Working his way up through the system to become a senior graphic designer at Loughry College supporting food technology students to develop advanced communication skills. Two years into his dream job, Maurice suddenly became seriously ill. The illness resulted in life changing bladder and bowel surgery and cut short his civil service career.

*"Trundling along in this job you've grown to love. You're the kind of trouble-shooter, you're the person who is going to give these guys the skills. And then, suddenly, your life is taken away from you."*

## **4.2 Time in a dark lonely place**

Maurice's health crisis resulted in an extended period in intensive care during which time his life hung in the balance. He spent a total of 10 weeks in hospital after which he returned home with severe pain, heavy duty medication and a raft of medical equipment. No longer able to urinate in the usual way Maurice had to catheterise himself seven times every day and will do this for the rest of his life. As the constant physical pain, the emotional anguish and the loss of purpose took its toll, Maurice found himself entering a dark and lonely place.

**Maurice:** *Ten weeks in the hospital, intensive care and home. I was taking Morphine and pethidine to try and kill the pain. I went down from 11 stones to six and a half stone.*

*The civil service gave me six months full pay and six months of half pay. Then no pay. I'm sitting [at home] thinking 'is this it?'*

*The pain was horrendous ... on a heavy cocktail of drugs and all the nonsense [constipation, nausea, insomnia] that goes with that. It got me down, it really did, and I could see no way out. I would have done something*



*to finish it – only for the fact my wife was going out in the morning; she was a teacher. And the young fellow, he was going off to school. I didn't want them coming home to find me. I couldn't do that. I was so close to contemplating ...*

**Interviewer:** Suicide?

**Maurice:** *Yeah, I just, couldn't. I just felt as if I had no worth, no value."*

## 5. The Individual Disabled/Deaf Artist (iDA) Grant

### 5.1 Maurice the Artist

Some eight years after his surgery, in 2002, Maurice was thrown a lifeline in the form of an iDA grant. He credits this experience with activating his artistic career and improving his health and wellbeing.

**Interviewer:** "At what point did you see yourself as Maurice the artist instead of the Maurice the civil servant?"

**Maurice:** *"2002. From 1994 to 1998 I did nothing. I'd left the civil service and for those four years I was really, really, down and could see no way out. It was a very dark place. It really was a very, very, scary place to be. I really, really, don't want to go back there; it's not a nice place to be."*

### 5.2 The role of the ADF/University of aTypical

With gentle persuasion from his wife, Maurice first approached the Arts Council of Northern Ireland in response to a newspaper piece about a grant scheme. A meeting with ACNI staff resulted in Maurice being guided towards the iDA scheme. At that time the University of Atypical was known as the Arts and Disability Forum (ADF) and the grant scheme was called Arts & Disability Awards Ireland (ADAI).

*"I came across it one morning in the Belfast Telegraph I'll never forget it. The Arts Council were offering individual grants. My wife said: 'why don't you do something with your art? Phone up the Arts Council and go and have a chat with someone about the grant'. I spoke to a guy called Francis Murphy. He's retired now. Lovely man. I told him, 'Look I've always dabbled in wee bits of painting – would there be any chance you would have a look at some of the stuff and see if you think it's worth me even considering?'. Francis was*

*supportive and said ‘Yeah, yeah, your canvases are small [postcard size] why don’t you go and work on a bigger scale? There is a group based in Belfast called the Arts and Disability Forum<sup>4</sup> - why don't you go have a chat? There may be funds that would pay for a trip to go and work in a different country and work on a bigger scale’.*

*Down I went to see Avril<sup>5</sup> and applied.”*

Eight years of virtual confinement in the house and unemployment had taken their toll. Maurice was emotionally fragile, and his confidence was at rock bottom. The iDA scheme is designed to be artist focused, to encourage and nurture confidence. The application process is simple and straightforward, and supports are available to help artists navigate their way through it, including individualised coaching. This supportive and empowering approach was described by Maurice as crucial.

**Interviewer:** “Your wife seems to have played a crucial role in helping you establish yourself as an artist.”

**Maurice:** “*She was crucial. Both she and Avril Crawford in the Arts and Disability Forum, who was superb, absolutely superb.*”

**Interviewer:** “What made her superb?”

**Maurice:** “*She understood where I was coming from. That dark place. She didn't delve too deep by asking questions that were, could have been, hurtful for me to answer. She just gave total encouragement.*”

A relatively modest grant of £3,000 enabled Maurice to travel to Canada and spend time working on the Alberta prairies.

*“I think the grant was about £3,000. It covered flights, accommodation, medical insurance, materials, everything – the whole lot and that is why I am so indebted to the Arts Council and the ADF. They gave me the chance to do something that would lift me.”*

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<sup>4</sup> The University of Atypical was formerly the Arts and Disability Forum

<sup>5</sup> Chief executive at the time

The iDA Award was the first time that Maurice had been away. His brother lived in Canada, but Maurice had never visited. Canada and the sheer scale of its landscape had a profoundly transformative impact on Maurice personally and on his artistic practice.

*“Spent three weeks with my brother in Calgary. He’s in sales and would cover about half of the county of Alberta. So, he would drop me off at the side of the road somewhere. I would paint the prairies and he would pick me up on the way back. The first time Richard dropped me off on the prairie I looked up and I fell over. The size of the skies. Wow!”*

### **5.3 Competence, Confidence and Connected**

In a 2012 evaluation of the iDA Awards across the island of Ireland, competence, confidence and connection emerged as key impacts of the scheme (ADF, 2012). Significantly these factors manifest in Maurice’s story. Prior to the iDA Award, Maurice’s world had contracted and his contact with other people was minimal. His life had become dominated by disability and he felt that he had nothing worthwhile or interesting to contribute in social settings. The grant changed that and gave a major and much needed boost to his confidence, artistic practice and connected him to a global community of artists.

*“Getting the first grant, going out to Canada; I met people, I was talking to people, it gave me the confidence to go on to the next thing. What I’m getting at in a roundabout way is —when you come back from those experiences you’ve got something to talk about, to tell people, and they’re interested, and they are asking questions.”*

There are no outward signs that Maurice is disabled, but the life changing surgery means that he needs ready access to clean bathrooms with washing facilities. The absence of these facilities can result in serious and fatal health complications.

*“Because of the nature of the surgery I have to be close-ish to a toilet with washing facility. I have to plan everything ahead of time before I go out. I have to have my catheters. I have to know where the nearest toilet is going to be. Because I have to wash and change dressings. So, I need to know where I can get access to those facilities and people have said to me ‘but sure you can go to the toilet anywhere’. No, you can’t. I can’t use an ordinary public urinal type*

*unless it's got the disabled wash hand basin, because I have to wash the area before I put the catheters in."*

As someone with an invisible impairment Maurice regularly experiences judgemental looks and tuts when he's seen entering or leaving a 'disabled toilet'. He described the hurt that he feels and how he resists temptation to explain why the accessible toilet is essential for him.

*"It really hurts. Because they don't know what's going on in there. You want to say to them. But you don't."*

The toilet encounters exemplify the stereotypical image of what is meant by the term 'disabled' and something that Maurice grappled with when he first became involved with the University of the Atypical<sup>6</sup>.

**Interviewer:** "How did it feel to be applying for a grant for disabled artist?"

**Maurice:** *"I had gotten it completely wrong. I had vision of disabled artists as people in wheelchairs, or somebody who's got an arm or a leg missing. I arrived down and Avril (the then CEO) was deaf, there was a person in a chair, a wheelchair - lovely guy, a singer songwriter. But they weren't disabled to me they were just normal people. I thought - you know if they can do it, I could maybe do it."*

Over the past 16 years Maurice has worked closely with hugely talented, cutting-edge artists with disabilities of various disciplines, both at home and around the world. For him the artistic talent is paramount and disability fades into the background. Nevertheless, owning the label 'disabled artist' is something that he finds difficult due to the stereotypical images associated with it. Growing mastery and competence in his artistic ability is however giving him the confidence to not care about the label and the assumptions that are made.

*"I hate that term 'disabled artist'. Because it's seen by the general public that you're in a wheelchair. I have an invisible physical disability that I don't make a big play of. The BANFF residency<sup>7</sup> gave me the confidence to stand back and say you know what - I don't really care. I do care but I don't."*

Living with the daily challenges of disability and the prejudices that surround it can be disempowering and soul destroying. The work of the University of the

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<sup>6</sup> The organisation was known as the Arts and Disability Forum when he first had contact with it.

<sup>7</sup> BANNF Arts Centre in Canada. The residency was awarded after the iDA grant.

Atypical and iDA Awards is directed at building confidence, nurturing talent and enabling disabled artists to overcome barriers to achieve their full potential. These elements were identified by Maurice as being at the crux of the scheme's success. Interpreting the iDA grant as a sign of others' confidence and belief in him was hugely empowering.

*"They [University of the Atypical] had confidence in me to do and that was nice. More than nice. They had confidence and I had none!"*

The experience gained through the iDA Award proved to be particularly liberating by freeing Maurice from the need to please others with his art.

*"Calgary gave me the confidence to allow others to not like it [the art] and to not take that personally. In the past I would take it personally. That you don't like what I do; you don't like me. It's nothing to do with that. That's the confidence that the ADF gave me. To go to Canada and to not mind if you don't like that."*

Maurice was in his 40s when ill health forced him to give up paid employment. Now aged 65 years, it is approximately 16 years since he first identified himself as an 'artist' but much more recently that he has started to sell his work.

*"I didn't actually start selling work. I did put it on show, but it wasn't for sale, because – I didn't want to let it go. Every piece is special, it's part of me. I've only really started selling work commercially about three or four years ago."*

The fact that his art has given him purpose and employment is a source of great comfort. He is also generous in the recognition that he gives to the University of the Atypical in helping him to realise his potential.

*"It's work, it gets you out and I wouldn't have had that without the University of the Atypical. Seriously I would not have that today without them."*

## **6. Artistic Practice after the iDA Award**

### **6.1 BANFF, the Olympics and much more**

The iDA grant has had a profound and lasting impact on Maurice Orr's life and career. Throughout the interview he was animated, enthusiastic and eager to share his experience.

*“I've been to Calgary; I've been to Vancouver Island. I've been in Whitehorse in the Arctic; I've been to Iceland. Australia, Thirroul, south of Sydney in the DH Laurence studio.”*

In 2003, the year after his first iDA Award, Maurice returned to Canada having won a 10-week residency at the prestigious BANFF Arts Centre.

*“There are 1,500 people from all around the world who go there to spend quality time doing nothing other than thinking, living, eating and sleeping art. Composers, writers, dancers, ceramists, sculptors – all art forms. If BANFF doesn't have a facility for the art form, it doesn't exist. It's as simple as that.”*

Working in this rich creative environment alongside world famous artists - people whom he describes as ‘geniuses’ – Maurice couldn't help but be inspired, encouraged to experiment and find a new way of seeing and doing.

*“That first day it was 30° below and 40° below on the second day. You can't go outside and paint. So, I'm stuck in a studio looking out at snow and trees. I'd gone there originally to paint big skies and mountains. Couldn't see them. All I could see was tree trunks. And I just thought ‘oh what am I going to do? I'll just go home!’ But you couldn't help but be inspired by being there among all these other people. Because, they give you something. They gave part of themselves to me and I took it and changed it. There were three concerts a week. The same piece of music was never played twice. So, you are working in an environment of constant change and just pure creativity and it was just amazing. So, this is going on all around you. I started painting twee chocolate box paintings. After the third week of being there I thought ‘no I'm here to do my thing’. That's when I started to play and push paint and have fun with paint.”*

Building on recent iDA experience, the BANFF residency gave Maurice a major confidence boost. He described the freedom he found in the letting go of expectations and limits. Having ‘fun with paint’ allowed Maurice the opportunity to experiment, find his own style and to look at things in a completely new way. Describing the excitement and freedom of working with First Nations<sup>8</sup> colours he explains:

*“This is when I started to push paint. It worked the first time. Serendipity? Would it work a second time? So, I played about with it and yes you can get it.”*

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<sup>8</sup> Many people who were misnamed "Indians" now prefer to be called First Nations. First Nations people identify themselves by the nation to which they belong, for example, Mohawk, Cree, Oneida, and so on.

*So, at a certain time in the day with the light, you can't really make up your mind whether you are looking at the dark of the forest or the whiteness. Are you looking at the lodgepole pines? or are you looking at the space behind? This is what the University of the Atypical gave me a chance to do."*

Testimony to the exceptional quality of the work produced by Maurice during this time, one of the pieces was purchased by the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Reflective of his talent and experimental cutting-edge approach, in 2010 Maurice was one of only 29 disabled artists commissioned by the Organising Committee of the 2012 Olympiad and Paralympic Games under the Unlimited scheme, to create work commemorating the event and embodying Olympic values.

***"That Olympic award: it was brilliant; it was the most incredible experience to work with other disabled artists. It was just the biggest ball of excitement ever.***

***I'd submitted a proposal - I thought I hadn't a chance but submit it anyway if you don't send in the form you'll never know. I was standing in the bank in Ballymena and the phone goes; it was Cian Smyth from the Arts Council.***

***'Maurice are you anywhere near a chair?'***

***'No, I'm not I'm in the bank.'***

***'Get yourself a chair and sit down''***

The illustrious Cultural Olympiad commission accelerated Maurice's career trajectory to a stratospheric level. Using fine oil paints and fish leathers 'The Screaming Silence of the Wind' is a stunning, large scale series of five paintings that celebrate the landscapes of Iceland and Northern Ireland. The pieces were to have longevity and were created used premium materials, including enormous (5x 7 feet) bespoke canvases made from 'best Irish linen' and fish leather imported from Iceland. The work was exhibited in the Southbank during the Olympics. One of the pieces was subsequently purchased by a private buyer, Mr. Steven Butcher, and donated to the National Trust. It is now on permanent exhibition in the Giants Causeway visitor's centre.



**Interviewer:** “How does it feel to be spending £3,000 on fish leather?”

**Maurice:** *“Great, great, absolutely brilliant. I could never have been able to afford it. But scary, scary, very scary because they have given me their confidence to do something. It’s the same as the BANFF thing: I have to be good enough to do something that’s going to be important. That they are going to be proud of it’s their money and their time. It’s a contract.”*

Buoyed by a burgeoning network of artistic colleagues and friends around the globe, Maurice’s creativity, skill and desire to learn continues to develop.

*“I’m thinking of a wonderful woman that I met, Sue Austin, a visual artist: she also got a commission for the Olympics. She swam under water with an aqua lung – she was in a wheelchair and she went scuba diving – and the visual art piece was called ‘In Water, I’m Weightless’. I wouldn’t have met Sue if it hadn’t been for the ADF and the Olympic commission.”*

In recognition of his Olympic triumph Maurice was awarded two bursaries to complete artistic residencies and collaborations on Vancouver Island and Whitehorse, Canada, to work alongside a Canadian print maker and sculptor Joyce Majiski.

*“After the Olympic Games the committee came back and said we have money left over. We would like to give you some money to further develop your career and develop your practice. What would you like to do? So, I’d worked with these other artists and Joyce is a wonderful, wonderful most incredible print maker. So I thought I’d just love to learn a wee bit of print making. But she’s in Canada. She lives in Whitehorse in the Arctic.”*

Maurice spent a fortnight on Vancouver Island learning basic print technique before travelling up to Whitehorse. As so often has been the case he went in the expectation of one thing and encountered something completely different and with it more new experiences and learning.

*“When we talked on the phone, she [Joyce] was this [waist] deep in snow. I got off the plane and it was 38 degrees and the snow had gone. The heat was unbearable. She took me for a walk along the Yukon River. I came across a cable in the ground – turned out to be the transatlantic cable that went from Cork or from Ireland to New York and from New York across America to Vancouver. And what I’m getting at is, Joyce taught me a technique: how to*

*make a plate using glue and sand. When the glue and sand dry, ink the paper and you get an embossed effect.”*

Joyce and Maurice continue to collaborate. She recently spent three months working with him in Northern Ireland, during which time they ran print workshops and had a major joint exhibition in the BRAID museum.

Maurice’s studio is packed with examples of his work, the magnificent materials that he works with and beautiful catalogues from his numerous exhibitions. Amongst these is a recent commission paying homage to the work of artist Kenneth Shoemith. Maurice’s artistic talent is beyond reproach, but he is adamant that if he had not become disabled, he would never have had had the career that he has today. Ironically it was the despair caused by his illness that acted as the impetus to contact the Arts Council and ultimately resulted in the iDA Award that helped cultivate his talent.

**Interviewer:** “ If it hadn’t been for those 10 weeks when you were so critically ill you might have retired from the civil service with your pension and your lump sum and might you have gone to the Arts Council then?”

**Maurice:** [Lots of shaking of head] *“No. None of this would have happened. No, no!”*

**Interviewer:** “Why not?”

**Maurice:** *“Don't know. I just don't know. It maybe comes back to confidence – I just didn't have any confidence in myself back then.”*

## **6.2 Advice to other artists with disabilities**

Maurice carries his achievements lightly and is unrestrained in his gratitude for the support and help that he has received. Jane, his wife is credited as providing the impetus to action at key moments in his creative odyssey.

*“I don't know what deity up there has allowed me to do this – well I do actually she is called Jane – my wife.”*

The difficult period, although long gone, is still fresh, painful and all too easy to recall. These memories enable Maurice to empathise with the crisis in confidence that other disabled artists and want-to-be artists experience. He is

also quick to advise that they should not hesitate in reaching out to the Arts Council and the University of Atypical.

**Interviewer:** “For those people who don’t have a Jane in their life what advice would you give?”

**Maurice:** “That’s where University of the Atypical comes in. I tell people all the time that have any kind of a spark of an idea. Go and talk to them [Arts Council]. Go and talk to someone, go and talk to the University of the Atypical. Just go and do it. Just get out there. I don't mean to sound as if ‘you look at me I've done something’. Just go and do it. If you don’t talk to people nothing is going to happen. Just get out there. They are very nice people. What is the worst thing that can happen: they say no. So just go and do it.”

**Figure (2) Examples of Maurice’s work**



Smugglers Cave at the Giants Causeway



Benbane Head, Co., Antrim



Eyjafjallajökull volcano Iceland



Western Fjords from Skagaströnd

## 7. Discussion

Maurice Orr is a quiet, modest and laconic man. He is more comfortable speaking through paint than words. In consenting to this case study, he has shared very intimate and painful memories and experiences. These experiences are however not unique to Maurice. His harrowing accounts of emotional and physical pain are the daily reality of the lives of many people with disabilities.

As someone with an invisible impairment, Maurice has helped to shine a light on the day to day reality of this and the challenges that it presents. Ironically if it were not for the anguish, isolation and despair that resulted from disability it is unlikely that Maurice would have achieved so magnificently. It was in desperation that he reached out to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and subsequently to the University of Atypical.<sup>9</sup> His goal was not a career, but survival. To find something to do and a sense of purpose. At his first encounter with the Arts Council, Maurice timidly shared his postcard-sized paintings.

Today he is confidently 'pushing paints' and working with exquisite fish leathers and other premium materials on seven-foot canvases. The iDA Award in 2002 and the trip to the Canadian Prairies opened a new world for Maurice. A world with massive landscapes, vast skies and new experiences. Further grants help foster that sense of expansion.

Following his illness, Maurice's life was brought to an abrupt halt. He lost purpose, social networks and the body that he once had. Isolation and loneliness became the context for his life. The iDA Awards changed the focus of his life from his experience of disability to his artistic talent. The funding and experiences that came with it gave him something to talk about and nurtured the development of a supportive social network around him. The iDA Award was tangible evidence for Maurice that people believed in him. That knowledge was hugely empowering, and he credits it with nurturing his confidence and desire to do more.

The gentle mentoring and guidance that was provided by the University of Atypical was deemed by Maurice to be crucial in getting over that first hurdle. Jane, Maurice's wife is an omnipresent feature in his success. His confidante and muse, he credits Jane as the person who first recognised that art might be the way out of his dark space and who nudged him towards the next step and the next. For those aspiring artists who don't have a Jane in their lives, the

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<sup>9</sup> Formerly Arts and Disability Forum

University of Atypical is vital. Jacobson (2012) points to the vulnerabilities of people on the fringes of society, including disabled people, with regards to dignity violations. Interventions that promote and strengthen people's confidence, social networks and competence help to counteract these vulnerabilities. Investment in the University of Atypical and promotion of its work, including the iDA Awards, would help address some of the inequities that exist for deaf and disabled artists in Northern Ireland and enable them to live and work with dignity.

In the relatively short space of time since obtaining the first iDA Award, Maurice has had a meteoric career as an artist. The art is the focus, the fact that he is a disabled artist is irrelevant to the quality of the work. In a study exploring attitudes towards people with disabilities Aiden and McCarthy (2014) reported that two-thirds of the British public felt 'uncomfortable' talking to people with a disability. The same study revealed that a third of British people felt that disabled people were less productive.

Raising awareness of artists with a disability such as Maurice Orr helps address prejudices and preconceptions that exist in wider society. As part of Arts Council of Northern Ireland's disability action plan the iDA Award is a powerful example of how the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) can be actualised and transform lives.

Maurice Orr's vivid depiction of the life that he has lived since receiving the iDA Award in 2002 stands in stark contrast with his frank and candid account of the dark and painful times he experienced during the wilderness years. Since taking that first step to reach out to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, he has never looked back. The iDA Award marked the beginning of a major life enhancing experience. Maurice's story will hopefully provide inspiration, motivation and courage for other aspiring artists to take that first step and contact the University of Atypical and apply for an iDA Award.

*"It's been a ball. It is a ball. It still is a ball! It's a second chance I never thought that I'd have." (Maurice Orr, 24th September 2018)*



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