

THE IRISH TIMES

Business **This Week**

Friday, March 30, 2007. Business Editor: John McManus; Deputy Business Editor: Dominic Coyle



Aisling Project founder Caroline Casey: inspired by Ashoka she has gone from strength to strength in her campaign to promote a positive image of disability. Photograph: Alan Betson

A campaigner inspired by Ashoka

GABRIELLE MONAGHAN

Caroline Casey, founder of the Aisling Foundation and the 02 Ability Awards, came across Ashoka when she was being interviewed for a book on social entrepreneurs. The author described the organisation's work and the individuals it supported, arousing Caroline's interest in it.

"I thought to myself - that sounds exactly like me," she said. "In the background, Ashoka were looking to move into Ireland and several people had recommended me, so I e-mailed Bill Drayton, not knowing he was such a great intellectual. Then Paul O'Hara invited me to apply

to become a fellow." Caroline became Ashoka's first fellow in Ireland and the UK after it recognised the huge contribution she had made towards getting business leaders to realise the economic importance and ability of people with disabilities, both as employees and as consumers.

When Caroline, who is registered as legally blind, established the Aisling Foundation in 2000 to promote a positive image of disability - 90 per cent of people with disabilities were unemployed.

Businesses were resisting the equality, disability and employment legislation that had been designed to overcome this economic exclusion. They

viewed the legislation as threatening, complex and costly.

Caroline then founded the ability awards to recognise and reward businesses and public sector organisations that strive for best practice in meeting the needs of people with disabilities.

The televised awards showcase real examples of integration at work and highlight the economic value that this group provides as consumers.

By 2006, more than 100 organisations, employing some 10 per cent of the country's working population, were participating in the awards. As a result of Caroline's efforts, employers are increasingly realising the advantages of a

diverse and capable work force in a tight labour market.

Caroline's approach "has been way more innovative than any other approach", said Paul O'Hara, director of Ashoka in Ireland.

"She had a great idea, she is extremely entrepreneurial and now we are helping her scale the idea internationally."

Caroline is now considering franchising the ability awards and rolling them out in other European countries in a bid to make the Aisling Foundation financially independent.

The Ashoka movement has given her the confidence to push the boundaries and expand her unique model.