



*Pictured left:*  
RTÉ presenter, Gráinne Seoige, hosted the glittering People of the Year Awards for the third year running.

# Rolling out the Red Carpet for the Nation's Heroes

A massive TV audience this year tuned into the People of the Year Awards broadcast live on RTÉ One television from the Citywest Hotel in Dublin.



**IT'S BILLED AS THE SOCIAL** event of the year and, with household names like Colm Meaney and Brenda Fricker among those attending, it's easy to see why. But the People of the Year Awards, which are organised by Rehab and sponsored by QUINN-healthcare, are more than just about VIP-spotting and checking out the latest designer dresses – they have real substance too.

And this was never more evident than with this year's line-up of winners, which included campaigners against institutional abuse, Christine Buckley and Michael O'Brien, Limerick man Steve Collins, for his battle against gangland crime, and one of Ireland's greatest-ever rugby teams, which scored the country's first Grand Slam victory in 61 years. With each of the winners nominated by members of the public, these awards are truly the people's awards and Ireland's answer to a national honours system.

The awards this year notched up its 35th anniversary of celebrating the nation's heroes with a massive TV audience of over 454,000 viewers and arguably one of the most prestigious line-ups of winners in its history. The star-studded guest list featured a who's who of Irish society, including broadcasters Mark Little and Pat

Kenny, singer Sharon Corr, and songwriter Phil Coulter.

Gráinne Seoige presented the glittering ceremony for the third year running, which was no mean feat for the host who has never been busier working on a variety of shows, including *Up for the Match* and the *All Ireland Talent Show*.

Debbie Deegan, who won the International Person of the Year award for her work in founding the To Russia with Love charity, believes that the award has come at a crucial time in what is a very difficult year. She says, "I was among magnificent winners the night I received the award and the whole experience has been wonderful – thanks to Rehab for making us ordinary folk feel very, very special.

"Ultimately, the award will allow me to make greater changes for the children we work for as, following our appeal for funds on the night, donations have been pouring in ever since. The whole country seemed to see the show. Even the Irish Ambassador to the Russian Federation hosted a party in honour of the award at the Irish embassy in Moscow at the end of October."

For Gráinne Seoige, it's a great honour to be part of such an amazing



*Pictured above:* International Person of the Year, Debbie Deegan.

occasion. She says, "This year was my third presenting the show and the calibre of the people being acknowledged continues to make me proud to be Irish. This year's awards were particularly heart-rending. There were a lot of stories which involved people's courage and spirit being tested in the face of danger, abuse and even death. It's serious stuff. But there is something about Irish people – I think we have a kind of humour and resolve that comes to the fore when things are tough. I think it gives us all great strength to see how some of our own have met the stiff challenges that life has given them."

There were three award winners who stood out in particular for Gráinne. "Steve Collins from Limerick, really made an impression on me. He is a man who has refused to be

*Pictured right:* Following the murder of his son, Steve Collins was honoured for his extraordinary bravery in refusing to give into gangs and for his campaign to reclaim the streets of Limerick from criminality.





*Pictured above:* Some of the winners of the 2009 People of the Year Awards.



*Pictured above:* Dónal Clancy, General Manager, QUINN-healthcare (left), with An Tánaiste, Mary Coughlan TD (centre) and Bernie Lanigan, who won the Nurse of the Year special award.

silent in the face of a vicious campaign of intimidation after his son's senseless murder. We are all aware of the Collins' family story, but meeting the man really brought home to me that he is just an ordinary daddy and grandad, trying to make the best life he can for his family against real evil. Christine Buckley's acceptance speech with Michael O'Brien was nearly the end of me as far as composure on stage went, and Sarah Kavanagh who saved her sister's life – they come to mind straight away, but they were all fantastic winners."

And of course, that matter which is often a hot topic for viewers – which dress to choose for the big night? "Ah yes, the dress!" says Gráinne. "It's funny, the dress is something which does attract a lot of attention, but I guess you are standing on stage for a long time so every inch of it is scrutinised. This year I worked with the very talented Catherine Manning from wardrobe in RTÉ to select my gown. I have strong ideas about what suits me and works for an event of that nature, and she totally got me.

When we met and she showed me a selection of gowns, I loved that purple Marchesa gown from Costume on sight. I tried it on and never looked at another dress, it was that easy."

Pauline Crowley, Rehab's Head of Fundraising, has been involved in organising the awards for four years now. The awards raise valuable funds for Rehab's services. "This is the highlight of our fundraising calendar and we have over 850 guests in attendance, so it's a pretty big deal. We get fantastic support from the corporate sector and everyone really rallies round – the indications are that this year, notwithstanding the challenging economic times, will be one of our best years yet, which says a lot for the support we receive for our work." Pauline is keen to stress that the event is the result of a major collective effort across a number of teams in Rehab, each performing a vital role to ensure the smooth running of the event.



*Pictured :* Gráinne Seoige, host of the People of the Year Awards.



*Pictured above:* People of the Year Award winner, David Kelly, with Young Person of the Year, Sarah Kavanagh.

Over the past few years, she says that a major effort has gone into improving the event experience for those attending, as well as the show spectacle itself for viewers at home. "There's a lot more glam to the show now and it has a real red carpet, glitzy feel to it," she says. "We have a host of VIPs scattered throughout the audience, from Ambassadors and Ministers, to TV stars and leading socialites, and we have a stellar line-up of people presenting awards on the show. We have also taken steps to get details out of how to make a nomination to more people than ever before, and this year we engaged with social networking sites for the first time. We are also giving more awards so that we can recognise even more people.

Our sponsors, QUINN-healthcare, and RTÉ have been great. The RTÉ team encouraged loads of stars to attend on the night and they worked flat out for the months leading up to the event to ensure that a great night's entertainment was enjoyed by viewers at home."

So what are the awards like behind-the-scenes – it must be really exciting being involved in a live TV show? "The People of the Year Awards is not something that simply happens on the night – it takes a lot of planning and preparation – meetings with RTÉ, with the hotel, with the event management staff. On the day itself, I'm there from lunchtime and my job is to make sure that everything runs like clockwork, checking on the tables in the room, reviewing the seating plan, making sure that the winners are checked in and that the TV rehearsals are going OK. Then, as the event starts to get underway, it's about managing the red carpet arrival of guests, the champagne reception and ensuring that the dinner starts on time. After that, it's over to RTÉ at 9.40pm when the floor manager gives the signal and we're on the air! With a live TV show, there really are no second chances."

So what's the secret to looking glamorous all day long with such a hectic schedule? "Well, I choose an outfit that is comfortable to be in, that will not be a problem running between tables, and up and down stairs, and I always have a pair of flat

shoes on standby just in case. Occasionally, if there's a small window of opportunity, and I'm in danger of flagging, I charm the nice RTÉ make-up people into giving me a quick once-over and I'm ready for anything again!"

**For more on the People of the Year Awards, see [www.peopleoftheyear.com](http://www.peopleoftheyear.com)**



*Pictured above:* Renowned songwriter, Phil Coulter (left), with Phelim Drew, son of the late Ronnie Drew.



*Pictured above:* Rehab Chief Executive, Angela Kerins, with Irish rugby stars (left to right) Jerry Flannery, Luke Fitzgerald and Brian O'Driscoll.

## The 2009 Award Winners...

**The Irish Rugby Team**, represented by Brian O'Driscoll, Jerry Flannery and Luke Fitzgerald, received an award from rugby legend Willie John McBride and Rehab Chief Executive Angela Kerins for its skill, dedication and sporting success over the years and particularly for its success in the 2009 RBS Six Nations and Grand Slam victory.

**Brian O'Driscoll** received a surprise award on the night in recognition of his personal achievement and immense contribution to Irish rugby as captain of the Ireland and Leinster rugby squads and as a Lions player.

**David Kelly** was presented with an award by Colm Meaney and Niall Tóibín for his immense contribution to stage and screen in Ireland and as an international film star. His screen credits include *Strumpet City*, *Fawlty Towers*, *Waking Ned*, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

**Christine Buckley and Michael O'Brien** were both honoured for their courage, honesty and dignity in campaigning on behalf of the survivors of institutional abuse. An Tánaiste,



*Pictured above:* People of the Year Award winner, Eleanor Thomson.



*Pictured above:* People of the Year Award recipients, Michael O'Brien and Christine Buckley.

Mary Coughlan TD, guest of honour at the event, presented Christine and Michael with their awards.

**Steve Collins** was honoured for his extraordinary bravery, following the murder of his son Roy in Limerick, in refusing to give in to the gangs and for his campaign to reclaim the streets from criminality.

**Eleanor Thomson** received an award from singer Sharon Corr for her compassion in befriending a complete stranger who was suffering from cancer – she herself was recovering from her own battle with the disease – and for taking him into her home to care for him until he died last February.

**The Irish Hospice Foundation** was honoured for its support and commitment to the development of a comprehensive hospice/palliative care service in Ireland and for its vision for the future care of all people facing the end of life.

**Ronnie Drew** was posthumously awarded a People of the Year Award

for his crucial role in re-energising Ireland's musical heritage and for his inspirational talent as a musician and vocalist. His son and daughter, Phelim and Clodhna, accepted the award on behalf of their father from songwriter Phil Coulter.

**Bernadette Lanigan** was presented with a special award for Nurse of the Year by Brenda Fricker and Dónal Clancy, General Manager, QUINN-healthcare, for her unparalleled dedication and care for the children who attend the eye department in Temple Street Children's University Hospital.

**Sarah Kavanagh**, age 20 from Rathgarogue, Co. Wexford, was honoured with the Young Person of the Year award by Peter Kelly, aka Franc of *Brides of Franc*, for her immense courage in saving the life of her 12-year-old sister following a freak accident which caused a local petrol station to explode in flames.

**Debbie Deegan**, founder of the charity To Russia with Love, received the honour of International Person of the Year from columnist Brendan O'Connor for making a life-changing contribution to thousands of abandoned children in the Bryansk region in Russia.

**Sylvia Meehan** was presented with an award by former Irish President Mary Robinson for her role as a vociferous campaigner for equal rights and for older people. Last year, she led a determined campaign against the abolition of the universal entitlement to the medical card for the over 70s.