

# The Lifesaving Foundation

**John Connolly**

The aim of this educational article is to provide a historical overview of a small charity called The Lifesaving Foundation. The foundation is based in Ireland, has an international membership, and supports the development of lifesaving in countries in Africa and Asia. It aims to reduce the number of drowning deaths worldwide by supporting and conducting drowning prevention-related research, organizing a regular research conference to disseminate the latest drowning prevention and rescue research, publishing water safety and drowning prevention information, and financially supporting water safety-related projects in low and middle income countries.

*Keywords:* lifesaving, lifeguarding, water safety, drowning, charity.

Drowning is a major cause of death worldwide and, among other initiatives, it can be reduced through the formation and support of local and national lifesaving organizations. High income countries (HICs) generally have such organizations, whereas developing or low and middle income countries (LMICs), where the majority of drowning deaths occur, may not. Ireland has a number of lifesaving organizations ranging from large national organizations like Irish Water Safety (IWS) and the Royal National Lifeboat Institute (RNLI) to over 30 small voluntary community-based rescue and recovery services. The Royal Life Saving Society Republic of Ireland Branch (RLSS IRELAND) was established in 1904 before the establishment of the independent Irish state and remains a member of RLSS UK and the RLSS Commonwealth Society by virtue of its historical origin. The Lifesaving Foundation (originally called the Irish Lifesaving Foundation) was founded by RLSS IRELAND in 2003, with the aim of ‘saving lives from drowning—worldwide.’ This educational article provides an overview of the Foundation’s first decade aiming to expand and update information originally provided at the inaugural International Aquatic History Symposium and Film Festival in 2012 (Lifesaving Foundation 2012).

## How It All Started

In 1999, RLSS Commonwealth Secretary General John Long suggested to RLSS IRELAND that it might provide financial and technical support to a lifesaving organization in Africa as a 2000 CE millennium project. The branch agreed, reasoning

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that Ireland was well-served with lifesaving organizations and had a surplus of both financial and technical resources that could be shared with others. A subcommittee was established to oversee the project. A small organization, Kenya Coast Water Safety Development (KCWSD) based in Mombasa, was identified as the LMIC partner. Due to communication problems arising from poor infrastructure in Kenya at that time, nothing happened on the ground in Mombasa until 2002.

RLSS IRELAND had begun collecting swimwear, towels, goggles, rescue equipment, manuals, and lifeguard clothing and sending it to the RLSS Commonwealth office for use in Kenya. As a consequence of the communication delay, it was decided not to store the goods but to distribute them around the LMIC lifesaving world. At the 2001 Commonwealth Lifesaving Conference in England, participants from developing nations were invited to fill their suitcases with whatever they could bring home with them. Airlines had been contacted and many agreed to ignore weight limits upon production of a letter from the RLSS Commonwealth Office. This continued for many years and lifesavers visiting LMIC countries often brought extra lifesaving goods with them. It stopped only when airlines began to charge for luggage. By 2008, clothing and equipment had been supplied to lifesavers in Antigua, Barbados, Botswana, Gambia, India, Kenya, Lesotho, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, St. Lucia, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

In August 2001, a family of four Irish vacationers drowned while on a fishing trip close to Mombasa. The capsizing of their boat was observed, but there was no rescue service and all had drowned before help arrived (The Free Library, 2013). The tragedy was raised with RNLI and International Lifeboat Federation (now the International Maritime Rescue Federation) representatives at the 2002 World Drowning Prevention Conference in Amsterdam, and a proposal to provide an in-shore rescue service in Mombasa emerged. Over the following weeks a plan was formulated; RLSS IRELAND would buy a used in-shore rescue boat from RNLI, the International Transport Federation would arrange free transportation of the boat, engine, and spares to Mombasa, and RLSS IRELAND would pay the fares of crew members to travel from Mombasa to the RNLI training center in England where they would be trained and accommodated free of charge. During this time, the Kenyan economy was collapsing and it became clear that no local money would be available to pay either the storage, maintenance, or running costs of an in-shore rescue service. If the service was to become a reality, it would have to be entirely funded externally; thus, the idea was shelved and then dropped. The Foundation was on a steep learning curve.

In 2002, two lifeguard tutors traveled to Mombasa to train a group of pool and beach lifeguards for employment in local hotels. A German tour group had indicated that it would include Mombasa as a destination in its brochures only if pools and beaches at holiday resorts had lifeguards with an internationally recognized qualification. This would provide the individuals concerned with employment and would boost the local tourism industry. The Foundation became aware for the first time of cultural differences because all of the candidate lifeguards were male and related to hotel staff. KCWSD introduced a gender equality opportunity by adding a first aid course for female child minders to the program. Foundation directors learned that it is necessary to put aside western ideas and values and to work within local cultural practices. The project was very successful and a request was received to send more tutors in 2003.

The Branch decided that it did not wish to support long-term projects. A small group of RLSS IRELAND members were interested in continuing so a new separate organization was formed. It was named The Irish Lifesaving Foundation and incorporated in Ireland as a Company Limited by Guarantee and Not Having Share Capital (a not-for-profit company, where members agree to pay a maximum of €2/\$3 each should the company become insolvent) and registered as a charity in 2003. Plans were made to return to Kenya, but the security situation deteriorated there; tourism collapsed, along with their economy and the Foundation's first project.

## A New Strategy

After the 2001 Commonwealth Conference, requests had been received to financially support projects in Lesotho and Uganda. In Lesotho, a church charity (The Lesotho Durham Link [LDL]), was providing unstructured water safety education in schools in response to a serious national drowning problem. A number of large dams had been constructed to sell fresh water and hydroelectricity to South Africa. The Basotho, a nation of people used to mountain streams and rivers, were having difficulty adjusting to living alongside large deep bodies of still water. The LDL requested financial support for instructor's salaries. Two requests were received from Ugandan lifesavers: (1) the funding of water safety radio advertisements aimed at boat users on the great lakes and (2) the provision of a motorcycle to a lifesaving leader for transport within Uganda. The requests were considered, and it was decided that in future there would be at least two projects ongoing at any time in case one collapsed.

Money was donated to LDL to pay instructor's salaries and to purchase a color photocopier for the production of local safety leaflets. Equipment (including Lesotho's first mountain rescue stretcher) was supplied and arrangements made to send representatives to Lesotho to upgrade the lifesaving skills of their trainers. A training opportunity arose by way of Lifesaving South Africa (LSA) hosting the 2003 RLSS Commonwealth Championships. Two Foundation representatives traveled to Durban where use was made of the championship pool to train a group of Lesotho lifesavers. The training continued in Lesotho after the championships, where a new national lifesaving organization, The Royal Lesotho Lifesaving Association (RLLA), was founded with His Majesty King Letsie III as patron. Funding was then provided to establish an RLLA school's water safety training program (Figure 1).

The radio advertisements in Uganda were funded as thousands of persons drown annually on Lakes Victoria and Albert (Wiebenge, 2010). It was quickly realized that there was little sense in promoting the wearing of lifejackets when they were not available locally and recommending the avoidance of overcrowded boats was impracticable. The motorcycle request was unsuccessful but it pointed to a distance problem that would arise again (i.e., the localization of training due to the time and cost of internal travel).

In the years between 2003–2009, in addition to collecting and distributing swimwear and equipment, the Foundation funded various projects. There were a number of school and youth organization water safety education projects in Lesotho, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania (Figure 2). A number of safety leaflets were published that are freely available on the Internet (e.g., Irish Lifesav-



**Figure 1** — School-based water safety and rescue instruction in Lesotho.

ing Foundation, 2006; 2008a; 2008b). This was a relatively prosperous time in Ireland and donations were easy to get. The majority of members were Irish with a small number of international members. All of this was to change in 2007 as Ireland entered a recession.

## Key Projects

A number of key international drowning prevention and water safety projects supported by The Lifesaving Foundation are worthy of separate explanation and comment.

### The Sri Lanka Women's Swimming Project

The Sri Lanka Women's Swimming Project was founded by Mrs. Christina Fonfe in the aftermath of the 2004 Asian tsunami and is incorporated as a charity in the United Kingdom (Fonfe, 2010). In many countries, females are not taught to swim for cultural reasons (Figure 3). The majority of those who died in the tsunami were females or children, consisting of up to 80% of all casualties in some regions (Crawford, 2005). This project uses female teachers in private pool sessions to teach women and teenage girls to swim. When they can swim, they are shown how



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**Figure 2** — Water safety workshop in Moshi, Tanzania, 2010.



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**Figure 3** — Example of cultural practice: A boy swims while his sister watches.

they can teach their own children and families to swim (Figure 4). A number of pupils receive further training to qualify as swimming teachers and are employed as such by the project and local pool operators with microeconomic benefits. The Foundation provides financial support to this project.

### **The Lifeguard Training Project**

Mrs. Pat Wilcox's involvement with lifesaving in Soweto, South Africa, began in 1990 when access to the township became possible. Her initial role was as a vol-

unteer swimming and lifesaving/lifeguard instructor, but it soon expanded into her training unemployed young swimmers for employment as lifeguards in public and private pools in nearby Johannesburg. Foundation members became aware of her work in 2005. Funding is always a problem for her as the youths have little money themselves. Through her dedicated work, hundreds of youths have been given a career by way of their obtaining a vocational qualification that gives them both a job and status within their community. The Foundation established the Lifeguard Training Project in 2005 to support Pat Wilcox's work. Single specific lifeguard training opportunities for young swimmers in other LMIC countries have also been funded through this project (Figure 5).



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**Figure 4** — Survival floating being taught in Sri Lanka.



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**Figure 5** — Lifeguard training in Africa.

## Suicide by Drowning

Drowning as a means of suicide is an aspect of the overall drowning situation that is ignored or overlooked in many parts of the world. A survey involving over 160,000 suicidal deaths in 16 European countries established that drowning was the method chosen by 3% of all males and 7.7% of females (Värnik, et al., 2008). Ireland has a serious suicide by drowning problem with the number of suicidal drownings exceeding that of accidental drownings by a ratio of close to 2:1. The Foundation has undertaken and published research into suicide by drowning in Ireland establishing that, while there is a serious problem, there also are many successful prevention strategies that can be duplicated elsewhere (e.g., the establishment of weekend night foot patrols by trained volunteers at high risk locations supported by an on-water or on-call rescue boat) (Connolly, 2011a; Connolly 2011b; Wilson, Smyth & Connolly, 2011; Figure 6).

## Drowning Research

The foundation has always been conscious of the value of promoting research into lifesaving matters and members have written and presented papers at various national and international conferences. Foundation aid recipients have been encour-



**Figure 6** — Foyle search and rescue removing a casualty from the river.

aged to carry out local research into the causes of drowning and to develop their own national award schemes based upon their research. Lifesaving organizations in developing countries sometimes adopt award schemes produced for other nations because training materials are easily available or have been supplied to them free of charge. Community rescue organizations and local fire brigades in Ireland have been successfully encouraged to publish their call-out and rescue data (Avramidis, Stallman, Eds., 2010; Avramidis, Stallman, Moran, Eds., 2011), thereby making it available for further research.

### The Ireland Medal

The Ireland Medal was introduced in 2004 as a joint project between the Foundation and RLSS IRELAND to mark the centenary of the branch (Connolly, 2005). The Medal is awarded annually “to an Irish person or organization or to a person of Irish descent in recognition of an exceptional contribution to saving lives from drowning.” It has been awarded 10 times (Table 1) and has a high status due to the quality of its recipients. It generates valuable publicity for lifesaving and frequently draws attention to hidden aspects of drowning such as the success of Foyle Search and Rescue in reducing the number of annual drowning deaths in their local river from over 30 to 3 deaths, proving that it is possible to successfully reduce suicide by drowning rates (Wilson, Smyth & Connolly, 2011). An original piece of calligraphic art with images related to the recipient’s career is now presented in addition to the medal. The medal ceremony was originally accompanied by a half-day

**Table 1 Recipients of the Irish Lifesaving Foundation’s ‘Ireland Medal’**

Year	Recipient	Achievement
2003	An Garda Síochána	For swimming rescues by Irish police officers.
2004	Admiral Frank Golden RNRtd.	For his research into immersion hypothermia.
2005	Professor John Pearn	For his work on child drowning prevention.
2006	Garda Commissioner Eamonn Doherty Rtd.	For the reorganization of Ireland’s Air Sea Rescue service.
2007	Foyle Search and Rescue	For the prevention and rescue of over 1,000 suicide by drowning deaths in Northern Ireland.
2008	Chief Justice Terence Higgins	For his promotion of lifesaving in developing countries.
2009	Dublin Fire Brigade’s Water Rescue Unit	For the annual rescue of over 50 persons from drowning and South African.
2010	Mrs. Patricia Wilcox	For over 20 years of voluntary work training lifeguards in Soweto.
2011	Professor Linda Quan	For her work on drowning prevention and resuscitation.
2012	John Connolly	For his work with RLSS IRELAND and the Lifesaving Foundation.



Ireland Seminar addressed by lifesaving experts present at the award ceremony. The ceremony is now part of the expanded drowning research conference (Figure 7).

## The Drowning Research Conference

In 2009, a decision was taken to expand the half-day Ireland Medal seminar into a two-day weekend drowning research conference. A number of limitations were agreed upon, such as (1) the conference would be a small intimate event with a participant mix of drowning prevention researchers and drowning prevention practitioners; (2) all participants would live together in one hotel facilitating an overflow of discussion and debate into meal and recreation times; (3) there would be one presentation stream with no concurrent presentations; and (4) discussion of presentations would be as important as the presentations themselves (Figure 8).

The two-day conference has grown into a four-day event. Books of the original proceedings were published (Avramidis, Stallman, Eds., 2010; Avramidis, Stallman, Moran, Eds., 2011), but this was replaced in 2013 with the filming of presentations and making the film available to the world lifesaving community. A number of collaborative research projects and papers have resulted from relationships established at conferences, including a number of presentations at World Conferences on Drowning Prevention in Vietnam and Potsdam. The Foundation has within its membership world experts in many lifesaving disciplines who freely make their expertise available to conference participants (Figure 9).

## Foreign Holiday Drownings

The Foundation has formed partnerships with a number of organizations specifically devoted to promoting an awareness of the higher than normal level of drowning risk associated with foreign holidays. These include the Belgian charity Safe Coastal Tourism, and the U.S. charity Mexico Vacation Awareness. Persons on vacation,



**Figure 7** — Three Ireland Medal recipients. From left to right, Admiral Frank Golden (2004), author John Connolly (2012), and Professor John Pearn (2005).

especially in foreign lands, have been shown to be at greater risk of injury than when at home due to a combination of factors. These factors include a higher than normal exposure to water, unfamiliarity with the location, and greater alcohol consumption. The Foundation has developed a water safety slogan *Take The Time To Check It Out*, published a free leaflet (Irish Lifesaving Foundation 2008a), and presented papers on this topic at a number of international conferences (Avramidis, Stallman & Moran 2011; Connolly 2011c; Figure 10).



**Figure 8** — Author John Connolly addresses the 2010 Drowning Prevention and Rescue Conference on Suicide by Drowning.



**Figure 9** — Lifesaving Foundation Chairperson Brendan Donohoe and CEO John Connolly at the World Conference on Drowning Prevention in Vietnam.



**Figure 10** — The slogan for the Holiday Safety campaign: Take The Time To Check It Out.

## Lessons Learned

The Foundation Board of Directors has been on a steep learning curve working with some wonderful lifesavers and researchers, but unfortunately has been seen as a source of ‘easy’ money by others. The following is a selection of lessons learned:

- Lesson 1: *Allow for a long lead in time with projects.* It can take a long time to get any project moving in LMICs. Even when the contact person is efficient, the people they have to deal with and poor local infrastructure may seriously delay a project.
- Lesson 2: *There is a desire to attend international events.* Requests for sponsorship to attend international meetings, conferences, or competitions are common. This is a complicated situation as the total cost of one person attending an event can equal a year’s salary in an LMIC region. The Foundation has a policy of not paying international travel to conferences as it diverts funds away from local projects.
- Lesson 3: *Lifesavers in developing countries can have great difficulty in accounting for monies donated.* Charities have to account for monies received. The Foundation must submit an annual audit to Ireland’s Revenue Commissioners to maintain its charitable status. Even when local lifesavers understand the need

to account for donations received, the people they deal with often don't issue receipts. Photographic evidence and independent corroboration of projects is sought whenever possible.

- Lesson 4: *There is a need to have people on the ground.* Small charities have a dilemma in that to ensure that monies are being spent properly, it is desirable and sometimes necessary to have your own representative on the ground; however, the cost of doing so is high. Many large charities send their own full-time employees to oversee projects, but the Lifesaving Foundation is too small to do so and relies on trusted local representatives who report on activities at our conferences. Although the Foundation has donated toward the salaries of employees of other organizations, it currently has no employees of its own; all officers are volunteers who pay their own general expenses.
- Lesson 5: *Monies donated are sometimes not used for the purpose agreed beforehand.* An organization or local leaders may have different priorities to those of the Lifesaving Foundation. An example is discovering that monies donated to send a lifesaving trainer to a course in a neighboring country was diverted by a more senior officer in the organization to fund his own attendance at an international conference. On another occasion, monies donated to buy lifeguard uniforms were spent on tracksuits for a national swim team with the justification that after a time they would be given to lifeguards as uniforms.
- Lesson 6: *Everyone needs an income they can live on.* It is understandable that when monies are donated to cover personal expenses, people with low incomes try to keep as much of the available expenses as possible for themselves. This sometimes leads to one key individual trying to do too much to justify expenses and has sometimes delayed projects. Sometimes able people with whom you have built a good working relationship are promoted or change jobs and are no longer available to complete projects. One important thing to remember is that people with low incomes cannot pay costs themselves in advance and then wait for reimbursement. Often organizations cannot find the money needed to set up a bank account and a small initial donation is sent via Western Union for this purpose. Afterward, all monies are sent by bank transfer into an organization's bank account.
- Lesson 7: *National swimming organizations often swallow up embryonic lifesaving organizations and have different priorities from those of the original organization.* This is a situation common to both HICs and LMICs and is promoted on the grounds of economic efficiency. The Foundation does not fund competitive swimming projects but is sometimes seen as a source of funding by swimming organizations. On one occasion, the Lifesaving Foundation was asked to fund the sending of a leading international competitive coach to train a development squad on the grounds that the swimmers would later train as lifeguards.
- Lesson 8: *Some countries are so large that internal travel is costly and time consuming.* This is a real problem for young national organizations and tends to lead to fragmented development. In one country, the Foundation funded the purchase of a used car but the roads were so bad that within 3 months an axle broke. It was realized that servicing and repairs would have to be funded

on an ongoing basis so losses were cut. The Foundation is working with the Scouting associations in Tanzania and Liberia in an effort to overcome this problem. Scout leaders come together at national jamborees where they receive water safety instruction which they then bring back to their home locations.

- Lesson 9: *The storage and maintenance of equipment can be a serious problem.* Many people in developing countries live in small dwellings with little or no storage space for donated equipment. Manikins worth thousands of Euro have been found stored in open sheds. The early Mombasa lifeboat project failed on this point.
- Lesson 10: *Lack of literacy to read technical/medical English is a real problem.* When asked if they can speak and read English many people answer positively, but it is then discovered that they cannot read lifesaving manuals adequately. There is a need for graphic novel style water safety and training publications.
- Lesson 11: *International aid organizations often have difficulty understanding the scale and scope of the world drowning problem.* The Foundation has applied for funding from governmental organizations, such as Irish Aid, in support of some projects and has been unsuccessful because international aid is mostly compartmentalized and what we do (as lifesavers) isn't medical enough for medical aid or educational enough for school aid.
- Lesson 12: *We cannot directly transfer first world prevention and rescue practices to third world locations.* Had a lifeboat been delivered to Mombasa, apart from the storage and maintenance situations, it would not have worked as they do in Ireland and the United Kingdom, because work and pleasure boats in Kenya do not carry flares to call for help, lifejackets are not available to keep passengers afloat until help arrives, and there was no fast way of calling out crew members.

## The Present

The Lifesaving Foundation Board of Directors undertook a major review of the charity and realized that little of what had been achieved had any real long-term benefit. This led to a determination that future projects would have some aspect that could continue once support was discontinued. Many projects were allowed to wind down but support was maintained for the Royal Lesotho Lifesaving Association, Sri Lanka Women's Swimming Project, the Lifeguard Training Project, the Ireland Medal, and research projects on suicide by drowning and on why swimmers drown.

It was decided to change the name of the charity from the original *Irish Lifesaving Foundation* to *The Lifesaving Foundation* as a mistaken impression existed that membership was confined to Irish citizens. The charity has members in numerous countries and consults members on policy matters electronically via the Internet and e-mail, in addition to the normal postal service.

Between 2011 and 2013, much of the charity's time and resources were focused on organizing annual drowning research conferences. While the conference has now been established with high repeat attendance levels, hosting one annually has been deemed to be too demanding of Foundation voluntary human resources. It has been decided to extend the interval between conferences to approximately 18

months to avoid conflicts with other international conferences such as the World Conference on Drowning Prevention and the Biomechanics and Medicine in Swimming Conference.

## The Future—The Lifesaving Foundation

The 2013 Annual General Meeting decided that the Lifesaving Foundation will continue as an independent charity with an increased international membership. In addition to full membership (€100/\$135 annual fee 2013) and Friend of the Lifesaving Foundation status (€20/\$27 annual donation), it will be possible for organizations to be represented through a named person. Greater use will be made of the foundation's website (<http://lifesavingfoundation.ie/>), Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/lifesavingfoundation>), and e-mail ([info@lifesavingfoundation.ie](mailto:info@lifesavingfoundation.ie)) to communicate with members. At a time of world recession, the majority of Foundation income will need to come from the members and much of the charity's activities will be member-based.

The Foundation has operated on a totally voluntary basis to date, but it is recognized that this has to change if the organization is to grow and expand its activities. The Internet contains a huge amount of valuable lifesaving information ranging from print and TV news reports, web published reports, technical papers, and conference materials. Staff will be tasked with sourcing and sorting the available materials and making them available to members through a greatly expanded Members Only part of our web site. The board recognizes that lifesavers are busy people and many do not have the time to search for suitable material and has committed to greatly expanding this existing service to members.

Instead of providing funding to embryonic lifesaving organizations, it is intended to continue to develop universal educational materials that can be translated into any language and downloaded free of charge from the web. This was trialed with the International Open Water Drowning Prevention Guidelines (Irish Lifesaving Foundation, 2010; Quan, Bennett & Moran, 2010) whose recommendations were converted into a booklet by the Foundation and into a safety poster by Kenya Lifesaving Federation with financial assistance from the Foundation (<http://lifesavingfoundation.ie>) (Figure 11).

It is planned to expand our association with scouting organizations as a means of overcoming the problem of large distances in some countries. The Foundation will provide trainers and educational resources (Avramidis, Stallman, Eds., 2010; Avramidis, Stallman, Moran, Eds., 2011) to scouting jamborees where leaders, and scouts can receive training in water safety and safe rescue.

The filming of conference presentations has been successful and all future Foundation conferences will be filmed and presentations made available to the world lifesaving community for a small fee initially. Finding a fixed time of year for the event is proving problematical due to the number of swimming, lifesaving, and medical conferences organized internationally and the decrease of time between World Drowning Prevention Conferences (from four years to two years).

We intend that the Foundation's second decade will be more focused and a lot more interesting and productive than its first one based on what has been learned. In making public our experiences, both successes and failures, we are inviting



**Figure 11** — The poster for the I’ll Die Before You Stop Talking campaign.

lifesavers worldwide to join with us, to share their knowledge and expertise, and accompany us our journey.

## Summary

This article aimed to provide an overview of past and present work of The Lifesaving Foundation including activities in Ireland and internationally as well as those planned for the future. Key aspects of new projects will be the transferability of what is learned across national boundaries and the embedding of lifesaving research into applied projects. A lifesaving research conference will be organized to promote and publicize research with the proceedings filmed for remote and virtual viewing. Membership in the charity is open to any interested adult worldwide.

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