



Lights, camera, Oscars Project

A novel storytelling initiative sees **LauraLynn children** and their families script a movie and star in it with the support of industry experts. Tomorrow, they get to walk the red carpet for the premiere of their cinematic creation, writes **Helen O'Callaghan**

THE hummer goes around the block, rounds the corner. A loud cheer goes up. There are the fans! And there's the red carpet! This is what six families will experience tomorrow at the **LauraLynn** Oscars, which take place at the Odeon, Charlestown in Dublin.

The digital storytelling initiative gives **LauraLynn children** and their families a platform to create their unique movie – while being supported by industry professionals. Tomorrow's red-carpet, black-tie event – all the **children** arrive in limos – is the culmination of this film creation process. It is a movie premiere experience for the entire family who are supported by the **children's hosts**.

The idea for the Oscars Project, now in its sixth year, began as a film workshop for siblings, which **LauraLynn** play therapist Michelle Hartnett organised after researching sibling loss. "The idea evolved. We realised the potential it could have if we involved the families," says Hartnett, who coordinates the project along with Lorna Collins and volunteer Joanna Butler.

Inviting professionals to look after the functional parts of the movie –

the scriptwriting and editing – is important, Hartnett says because it allows something special to happen between the family members. "It allows creativity to happen. It lets them bounce ideas off each other. It allows the family to be natural, and create together – without the pressure of the output."

Going on script

Once a **LauraLynn** family applies to participate, a scriptwriter is aligned with that particular family. "For example, this year we've an Irish-language film so we aligned that family with a Gaelic scriptwriter," explains Hartnett.

The scriptwriter then has an hour-long online meeting with the family – with a **LauraLynn** project coordinator also present – and through this learns more about the family and their interests. "The scriptwriter asks what kinds of films they like, what they like to do together, what songs and stories are important to them as a family."

The idea is to create a movie bespoke to that family. "We get a good sense of the family and the kind of film they might lean towards," says Hartnett, explaining that during this



Osin Murphy holding his brother Cian's Oscar at last year's celebration. Right: **LauraLynn** play therapist Michelle Hartnett: The idea for the Oscars Project began as a film workshop for siblings, which she organised after researching sibling loss.

meet-up the story is built with creativity, and magic.

"The scriptwriter brings them on a journey of an obstacle they might face and how they might overcome it. The obstacle is never anything to do with illness. It could be about a penguin in Dumes Stores eating all the ice cream, who has been misunderstood – all he was trying to do was find a job there. It could be Superman landing in the army barracks in Rathmines to save the planet."

"The scriptwriter is skilled at finding out who they are individually in the family. It's about exploring the relationships – who's the one in your family who has a bit of divilment in them?"

"Who'd be the one to save the day? It's about the strengths each family member has, so we can overcome whatever obstacle faces you."

The stars of the movie can extend beyond the nuclear family and include grandparents, cousins, even

pets – "we've had horses, turtles and everything in between". Whoever is important to that family has a part in the film.

"I'm always intrigued by the little details the scriptwriter picks up on that are authentic to the family," says Hartnett.

The family – given the script ahead of filming – chooses the movie location. A racetrack in Cork, a castle in Donegal and a courthouse in Meath are among many venues chosen by the 38 families who have participated since the project's inception.

Hartnett and Collins wanted to make the event "the Oscars" because we wanted a name that's widely recognised as a look to excellence". And it is most certainly the Oscars, with the child/family stepping down from the limo to a press interview with TV presenter Brendan Courtney.

"Students from Mount Anville Sec-

ondary School line the red carpet to cheer for the families. They create posters and build that excitement and it's authentic to what a red-carpet experience should be."

The aim, says Hartnett, is to celebrate the family, to have them all stand in the spotlight and to create moments of joy that become a memory captured forever. "The **LauraLynn** Oscars goes beyond the camera lens, and offers families a chance to explore their dynamics, share their stories, and collaborate in ways they've never imagined. [And] guided by our experts in each discipline, the family becomes the creator of their own cinematic masterpiece."

Brothers in arms

Last year, Limerick-based hospice nurse and mum-of-two Orla Murphy saw her 11-year-old son, Cian, "in his element" as he ran down the **LauraLynn** Oscars red carpet not once but

twice. Married to Eric, Orla's second son, Osin, is seven. She recalls immediately saying yes to participating in the project as soon as she heard about it. "We said it'll be a bit of fun." Cian, who spent his first 21 months in Crumlin hospital, has a collection of conditions, the chief of which is hypoparathyroidism – a deficiency of hormones produced by the pituitary gland. "He needs a maintenance dose of steroids to function every day. With Cian – as with any child with complex needs – there are lots of things we can't do, things we'd love to do but we just can't."

"The **LauraLynn** Oscars as we could do, so we said yes – it'd be something to have memories of."

"Their movie storyline," Orla describes as "bonkers" – involving zombies capturing the Limerick team which meant the All-Ireland GAA final couldn't go ahead.

"Cian loves GAA. He had to come up with an antidote to prevent the zombies from taking over the world. About 10 of the neighbouring kids got involved – they were zombies. A lot of these kids were very good to Cian when he was small – some of them helped him to walk. "And the whole thing was a real bonding moment for our two boys – Osin was so proud of his brother," says Orla, who confirms the Oscar statuette is on their mantelpiece in Limerick.

Scriptwriter Gavin Ryan sums up what **LauraLynn** Oscars are about: "The films – seemingly about fantastic adventures – are always about the love that keeps the families going through good days and difficult days. I challenge anyone to join us at the event and not be filled with amazement at how much these **children** and their families have to teach us about creativity, courage and humour."

