

# THE LIFE OF BYRNE – FROM CHAT SHOW HOST TO ROAD SAFETY TSAR

Perhaps facing his greatest challenge yet, Ireland’s iconic broadcaster Gay Byrne talks to **Dearbhail McDonald** about his new role as chairman of the Road Safety Authority.



What was he thinking of? It’s not so much the pitter patter of tiny feet, but the advance of a small infant army that is set to invade the life of Gay Byrne, Ireland’s new road safety tsar. At 72, Gaybo, Ireland’s legendary chat show host, is already a grandfather. His daughter Suzy has just given birth to her second child and his daughter Crona is set to give birth to her first child during the summer. Most grandparents, even reluctant retirees like Byrne, would be making the most of a reduced schedule.

“It’s a very busy time in the Byrne household right now,” Byrne laughs, nervously. Instead, the former host of *The Late Late Show*, the world’s longest running chat show, has accepted the role of chairman of the new Road Safety Authority (RSA). It was a surprise appointment, even to him. Hailed as a stroke of genius by the Automobile Association (AA), Byrne’s appointment was also derided as a cynical public relations exercise by a government that has consistently failed to deliver on urgent measures needed to reduce Ireland’s scandalous road deaths.

A board member of DCU Educational Trust, Byrne says his own heightened awareness of road safety compelled him to accept the job with the new authority. Seven years ago during his last *Late Late Show*, Bono, the lead singer of U2, presented him with a Harley Davidson. Though a veteran motorbike enthusiast, Byrne hadn’t ridden a motorbike in almost 30 years. Later he donated the bike to charity, but underwent retraining to take to the roads again after such a prolonged absence.

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“When U2 gave me the Harley, I started riding again and that brought it home to me more than ever before the importance of road safety,” he said.

“When you are riding a motorbike, you have to be a great deal more observant and concentrate more than you would be in a car, because you’re so vulnerable. You don’t have a ring of steel around you or safety belts to protect you. It beholds you to pay more attention to what you are doing. And because of that, I then became more conscious of what other people were doing on the roads. I was already in a much more

heightened road safety mood when I got the call from Martin Cullen, the Minister for Transport, asking me to be the chairman of the Road Safety Authority.”

Having courted controversy over the years by shining a light on an array of hot topics including divorce, clerical sexual abuse, contraception and AIDS, Byrne may in his twilight years face his biggest challenge yet.

“I thought about it for a few days and then said, yes, I’ll give it a go,” he said, acknowledging that the role will be difficult to juggle with his already extensive family, work and charity commitments.

“There weren’t enough hours in the day anyway before I took on this role to do what I wanted to do. But I’ve taken it on and that’s it. I’ll give it a bash and do the best that I can. You have to make what contribution you can, and that’s it.”

Born on 5 August 1934 in Dublin, Byrne was educated at Synge Street CBS and later entered the world of insurance before

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becoming Ireland’s most successful broadcaster. One of his ‘hang ups’ in life – surreal to imagine for the man who first introduced the Beatles on live television – is that he never got a university education. Nonetheless, he made up for that early shortfall when he was awarded an honorary doctorate by Trinity

College, Dublin and was made a Freeman of the City by Dublin City Council. Indeed, access to education is one of the main reasons why Byrne, arguably Ireland’s busiest pensioner, joined the board of the DCU Educational Trust.

The devoted Northsider admits that he has an inherent bias towards DCU, not least because it is located north of the Liffey, but also because he has family ties to the university. His daughter Suzy is a Business Studies graduate of DCU. For Byrne, the Trust, and in particular the North Dublin Access programme (NDA), is vital for young students who are denied access to education because of economic disadvantage.

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Byrne’s weekly debates on radio and television had a radical effect on Ireland’s rapidly changing social mores, churning out the well-worn mantra that there was no sex in Ireland before *The Late Late Show*. It is hoped that he will draw attention to road safety too in his unique way. However, Byrne admits that more than a €30 million budget and tough talking from a celebrity figurehead are needed to stem the tide of deaths on Ireland’s roads. The figures are shocking. In the eight years that have passed since the Government announced a strategy to deal with the road deaths’ crisis, almost as many people have been killed on the roads in the Republic as were killed through the 25 years of conflict in Northern Ireland. Between 1969 and 1994,

some 3,521 people lost their lives in the Troubles. Since 1998, when the Government’s road strategy was unveiled, 3,181 people lost their lives in road traffic accidents. Last year, 400 people lost their lives on Irish roads – a toll that Byrne says is ‘simply staggering’.

Byrne insists the appointment is not an act of window dressing. A sharp operator who loathes bureaucracy, procrastination and political ineptitude, he put the Government on notice that he will walk away from the RSA if he is stonewalled and doesn’t secure political co-operation. And that was just his acceptance speech!

“400 people killed on the roads last year,” said Byrne. “The number is even greater this year so far, and I shudder to think what the Bank Holiday weekends will do to that toll, despite all the publicity and advertising campaigns. There are people who are alive today who won’t be alive after the weekend and that is the stark reality. Many of those will be young people.

“‘It could be you’ is the motto of the lottery. Yes, it could be you to win €3.5 million, but that motto can easily be applied to getting behind the wheel of a car. This weekend, it could be you who is among the list of dead on Monday morning. A lot of that risk is entirely up to you. We can bring in all the penalty points and all the extra gardaí and threats in the world, but in fact what would work more than anything else is a change in attitude on the part of everybody.

“There is no shadow of a doubt that there is more chance of you meeting your death on the roads than there is of you scooping the jackpot.”