Irish Girl Guides press release
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Two Guiding lights first to receive Golden Sun Award

- Cork and Kildare Guide leaders earn top accolade for Irish Girl Guides' leaders –

Two leading lights in Irish Girl Guides (IGG) have become the first Girl Guide leaders to earn the organisation's top accolade for young women.

Aisling Claffey (24) from Cork and Aoife Leamy (25) from Newbridge were presented with the Golden Sun Award at a recent conference held in the Guiding centre at Lorne Estate, Hollywood, Co Down, attended by 60 members of Senior Branch (the IGG branch for 14-30 year olds).

The duo, who undertook a series of challenges over the course of two years, are chuffed to become the first two women to receive the award, which IGG launched for leaders in 2015. Girls from age five-plus in IGG have over 130 badges that they can earn; the Golden Sun Award was introduced so that adult members could work towards a goal too.

The award includes the same components as the Gold Gaisce with some additional Guiding challenges. Aisling and Aoife completed community challenges, developed life skills and undertook outdoor challenges as well as completing an adventure journey and a residential project. Aisling, a sales and marketing executive at Páirc Uí Chaoimh in Cork, and Aoife, a laser eye surgery manager with Optilase Eye Clinic in Dublin, were so keen that they completed 30 challenges more than they had to!

The duo greatly enjoyed doing the challenges, including craft evenings, discussions, debates and trying new physical activities, and felt a great sense of accomplishment on completion. Some they did together, including an 80 kilometre hike and camping trip in Co Kerry, which Aoife says was her favourite part of earning the badge.

"It was tough-going," she says. "Some days were easier than others but, as we lay in our tent at night, it was nice to chat about the day and reflect on the good parts!"

Working towards the award also saw Aoife increase her community involvement, develop her cooking skills, try out new forms of exercise and take part in a week-long residential event in France. She learned from her experiences that reflecting on an activity and project by writing a log makes it a lot easier to write a report months later! Also, that true friends can get you through anything!

Similarly, Aisling says the award allowed her to go on a great adventure with a great friend. "We laughed, cried, supported and motivated each other," she says. "From meeting at a Guide camp over 10 years ago, when we bonded over beans and ribbons, we have completed a number of Guiding experiences, challenges and activities together. Completing the Golden Sun together only seemed right!"

Working towards the award helped Aisling face her ongoing battle with anxiety. "The experience made me step out of my comfort zone, making me feel anxious at times but, having the right supports around me, allowed me to continue through the process," she says. "I learned that, although something may scare you and make you anxious, it doesn't mean you shouldn't do it. Facing fears and anxiety head on is one of the scariest things to do but, when you start to overcome

them or deal with them better, you will realise you are a much stronger person than you allow yourself to believe.

“For me, this pin means more than the challenges that were done to achieve it. It represents the experiences that were undertaken, the people who were there to support us, the amazing memories, the fantastic friendships and the personal journey.”

Aoife says she loved the fact a challenge was introduced for adult IGG members and was particularly motivated by the idea of being one of the first people to achieve it. She felt very proud to be one of the first recipients.

“As leaders, we are so committed to encouraging the girls to reach their goals and be proud that we forget that leaders sometimes deserve to be proud too!” she says. “From the outset of the award, I wanted to be the first to get it. It’s not about boasting rights, but it is about being an ambassador for the award – to show our members that it is an achievable goal. It is hard – it take a lot of time and commitment – but getting it first means that now the next person who sets out to do it has a reference.”

Guiding has been a massive part of Aoife and Aisling’s lives since they joined IGG age 11 and age 10 respectively. “I have gained confidence, life skills, camping skills, a songbook of campfire songs, bush craft skills, leadership skills, friendship and an appreciation of international cultural differences,” says Aoife. “But, mostly, I have gained the certainty of who I am and what mark I want to leave on the world.”

“Guiding has given me so much,” says Aisling. “I have made amazing friends, learned so many skills, have had once-in-a-lifetime experiences, travelled, lived in another country and much more – all because of my involvement in Guiding. I’ve gained brilliant experiences and been able to take great opportunities all while learning skills that will last a lifetime.”

Irish Girl Guides welcomes new members from age 5+ and adult volunteers from age 18+. No previous Guiding experience is necessary. See www.irishgirlguides.ie or tel: 01 6683898 to find out more.

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Photo captions:

Aisling Claffey (left) from Carrigaline, Cork, and Aoife Leamy from Newbridge, Co Kildare, pictured with their Irish Girl Guides’ Golden Sun Award pins

Notes for editors:

Irish Girl Guides has around 12,000 members, ranging in age from five to 30 years. 1,800 volunteer leaders are involved. Guiding started in Ireland in 1911 and operates throughout the 26 counties with leaders providing an informal educational programme of fun and challenging activities that foster confidence and leadership skills in girls and young women, enabling them to become responsible citizens. They can choose to earn a wide range of badges, including disability awareness, world cultures, science investigator, online surfer, STEM and engineering.