

Muscle dreams

Michael McGrath is a motivational speaker and businessman who has trekked to both Poles. He talks to Emma Bowler about life's adventure



When Michael McGrath was 18 years old he was diagnosed with Muscular Dystrophy (MD). A huge fan of the Tom Hanks film *Castaway*, McGrath describes the part of the film where Tom has just delivered a FedEx package and drives his truck to a crossroad: he looks at a map and realises he has no idea where he is going to go. “For me, that was like my diagnosis,” says McGrath. “I had no idea how life was going to unfold. That was my castaway moment.”

It would have taken a very imaginative screenwriter to have foreseen McGrath's life story. Recently named as one of Britain's most influential disabled people in the Shaw Trust's 2016 Power 100 list,

he is also a motivational speaker, business consultant, and adventurer – having made history as the first, and currently the only, disabled person in the world to have successfully led expeditions to both the North and South Poles.

Following his polar expeditions, he co-founded the Muscle Help Foundation (MHF). He says having MD puts his organisation in a very unique position to help others with the condition.

“I think what it does is provide us with an in-depth understanding and knowledge of muscular dystrophy – how it affects and impacts young people and their families,” he says. “It makes a huge difference. Young people want to talk to me, they want to chat because we all

wear the same T-shirt. There's a common thread and a shared spirit. It's a huge advantage.”

MHF works with families, delivering transformational experiences to children and young people with MD and similar neuromuscular conditions. These experiences, which the company has named Muscle Dreams, have included meeting Formula 1 drivers Lewis Hamilton and Nico Rosberg, interviewing movie legend Al Pacino, driving on the Silverstone Grand Prix circuit, and meeting footballers Wayne Rooney and Ryan Giggs.

The charity is unique because, whilst there are plenty of other charities that deliver similar ‘experiences of a lifetime’,

the MHF also works closely with the whole family, both before and after the experience day itself.

“The impact of what we do as a charity can be felt across the entire family,” says McGrath. “That translates into how we engage with the young person and the family unit, and that’s not just mums and dads. It’s not just about giving a family an envelope and saying ‘here you go,’ we get to know the families and they become our Muscle Warrior Tribe, our wider community, and our greatest advocates.”

Adapted vehicle

As well as being passionate about the MHF, McGrath is also an enthusiastic advocate of the Motability Scheme. He describes the reaction he has when young people with MD see him getting into or out of his Motability vehicle, a Chrysler Grand Voyager, which he affectionately calls the ‘Knightrider’.

“They see the ramp coming out and they look curious, so I say drive in and have a look. They look and their eyes get wider and wider, and they come out and say to their mum and dad ‘I’d like to drive one day’.”

McGrath drives from his power chair. “I find myself talking about the adaptations particularly to beneficiaries approaching the age of being able to drive,” he says. “The adaptations that I have are all about that possibility, it’s phenomenal the technology that’s available.”

Whilst the word inspirational is somewhat overused when it comes to describing disabled people, it is frequently used to describe McGrath. Indeed, as long as you don’t go down the route of describing him as ‘superhuman’ he doesn’t mind it too much.

“People do describe me as inspirational,” he says, “but I take it back to the Latin origin of the word – *spiritus* – which means



//
I just try to be
the best of me,
and do what
I need to do //

it comes from a very natural, authentic place for me. I don’t mind it.”

McGrath is just as humble about his inclusion in the Power 100 list. “We are all blessed in different ways,” he says. “We all have gifts within ourselves. I just try to be the best of me, and do what I need to do.”

“For me, being recognised in that way – as a role model – brings responsibility. I take that responsibility very seriously – in how I project myself, and in hopefully leading by example in some of the things I do.”

There’s a definite sense that, for McGrath, it is the work at grassroots level that really touches him. “I met someone – a young man who was 14 years old, with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy. He is in a power chair, very quietly spoken

‘breathing life into’. It’s about breathing positivity into an organisation or into other people, so

and without a great deal of confidence. His teacher asked if I would have a chat with him. I said I’d be delighted. We had a quiet 10 minutes and I gave him my Stronger Together muscle warrior wristband. He smiled and we had a little moment together. For me that is kind of where it’s at – quietly going about trying to make a difference.”

Dealing with disability

McGrath admits that dealing with an ever-changing disability is no mean feat. “I used to be upright, and for two and a half years I battled with a frame – a Zimmer frame if you like – which allowed me to move from bathroom to bedroom. I knew there would come a time that I would have to make the transition to remain in the seated position, but my instinct was to push on. My wife would say it’s about mental toughness.”

It also helps that McGrath has a ton of energy. “I feel I’m blessed with a particular type of Duracell battery that enables me to live a very full life,” he says. He also has a good support network. “I’m



blessed with two wonderful women in my world – my wife and my daughter – which means I can just get on with the business of living,” he says. “Most of the stuff I do is enormously fulfilling, and it’s that fulfilment that provides me with the fuel to keep focus.”

McGrath is definitely a ‘glass half full’ kind of man. “My life is challenging and some days I close the door of my ‘castle’ and it can be quite difficult,” he says.

“I’m not very good in the cold either. People with MD feel the cold, particularly in their extremities, their toes and fingers, which is ironic as I’ve been to both the North and South Poles.

“So yes, disability applies to me but it doesn’t define me. It does, however, shape who you are as a person. I try to squeeze as much as I can out of the business of living. Life is not a dress rehearsal; we only have one shot at it and I want to make the best of it.”

McGrath says he thrives with positive thinking and in a positive atmosphere. “When I meet positive people I’m at my best. Put me in a room with positive

people and they’ll get the best from me. Put me in a room with negative people and it’s a different environment to be in.”

Through the work of the MHF he is able to spread this positive outlook.

“Quite a few Muscle Dream beneficiaries come to us with a rather negative mindset, but a Muscle Dream can help people to see the world differently – they see their limitations in a different way, and that’s a very powerful thing.”

So what’s next? Well, apparently McGrath will be aiming to whet the nation’s appetite with his new project, MeatBalls4MuscleDreams. He’s been working on it for a while, but he’s determined to get it off the ground in 2017.

He explains: “It’s a similar concept to the Macmillan coffee mornings. You invite some of your buddies round to your house, cook up a pot of meatballs, and they make a donation to you, which you pass on to the Muscle Help Foundation.”

The project already has some high profile support: “Celebrity chefs Tom Kerridge and Chris Galvin have done a piece to camera for us, and we’ll have other chefs on board and giving us recipes.” Watch this space, he says.

Of course even those who run on the most powerful Duracell batteries need recharging, and McGrath says he relaxes by having dinner dates with his wife and recently married daughter.

He also loves his baths. “I have my Molton Brown moments. I drizzle a bit of Molton Brown bubble bath into the bath before I’m hoisted in. I can be soaking on a Sunday evening for a couple of hours. I’m my most relaxed in the bath and I have my best ideas in the bath,” he laughs: “Well, you did ask me what I did to relax!” ■

What is Muscular Dystrophy?

Muscular Dystrophy (MD) refers to a group of genetic, hereditary diseases most of which are progressive, characterised by progressive muscle weakness and wasting. MD affects over

70,000 people in the UK and it comes in over 60 different forms, including Duchenne MD, Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease and Spinal Muscular Atrophy. Some forms of MD are life-limiting.

For more information

The Muscle Help Foundation
01763 274 658
musclehelp.com
Twitter: @musclewarrior

Michael’s website
michaelmcgrath.co.uk

Follow Michael on Twitter
@MichaelMc_Grath