



▶ Máire Ni Dhomhnaill (left) on duty as a Garda Reserve member at a parade in Galway, Ireland.

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Máire Ni Dhomhnaill gives back by volunteering with the Garda Reserve in Ireland

Máire Ni Dhomhnaill is an enthusiastic and precise narrator. Her stories regarding her voluntary involvement with the Irish Garda Reserve are yet another example of Cook employees giving back to their communities. Máire, a senior biocompatibility specialist for Cook Limerick, chatted with **Vanessa Marengo** about her experiences with the Reserves from her hometown of Shannon in County Clare, Ireland.

Can you tell us a bit about this voluntary group in Ireland? Many of our readers might not be very familiar with it.

The Garda Reserve is a voluntary and unpaid body drawn from the community to assist the existing **An Garda Síochána**¹ at times when extra personnel are required. The first intake of Garda Reserves began training in September 2006 and became fully operational in December 2006. Numbers have fallen over the years, but at present there are around 450 reserve members in the whole Republic, and I am lucky enough to be one of them. We are a rare species. While on duty, we have certain Garda powers and perform our policing responsibilities as determined by the commissioner under the supervision of, and supported by, members of the An Garda Síochána.

What are the main duties of Garda Reserve members?

The principal role of the reserve consists of local patrols and crime reduction initiatives, targeted at specific local urban or rural problem areas. Members of the Garda Reserve are also involved in policing major incidents and events, and in providing other operational support to An Garda Síochána members on the basis of their individual skills or local knowledge.

I will give you a few examples of activities we do on a regular basis. When it comes to community engagement and public safety,

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for instance, we can be on duty at the outer cordon of major events such as festivals and major sporting events (such as rugby matches), but we can also be present in foot patrols, in which we are always accompanied by a member of the full-time Garda service. When it comes to confronting crime, we might be asked to give evidence in court, or serving summonses. We are also very active in road policing activities: you can find us at road traffic checkpoints, and we assist in the event of accidents, fires, and other major emergencies.

Has the pandemic changed these duties?

The pandemic changed everybody's life. Our activities decreased in some duties, and increased in others. Obviously, our presence at social gatherings, such as concerts or rugby matches, has decreased over the last two years. Interestingly, though, we have become more engaged in public movement duties. When Ireland was put under lockdown, we were out in the streets. Although there was a very high amount of conformity from the general public, we were often outside to check people's reasons to move around the country during such difficult times.



▲ Máire in uniform at Seafest in Galway.

How often do you work as a Garda Reserve member?

When you sign up, you are expected to work 280 hours a year. You are assigned to a station, which for me has always been in Galway, Ireland (which is about 108 kilometers or 67 miles away from Limerick) and within that station to a specific unit. You are free to decide when you can help out within this body and I usually volunteer during weekends, because of my commitment to Cook during the week.

Why did you get involved? Have you ever regretted your decision to join the Garda Reserve?

There are many reasons why I decided to apply. Firstly, I wanted to do something good for the community. Some people coach rugby teams, others volunteer at the local hospice or animal shelter. My involvement with the Garda Reserve is my own personal way to give back. I have never regretted my decision in more than 15 years. It gives me energy and confidence. Sometimes

Continued on next page

EMPLOYEE FEATURES

Continued from previous page

people ask me why I continue this adventure. **I did not go in for the money²**—actually, nobody joins the police in Ireland for it. I always reply that I do not have to do it. I get to do it. No matter how small it might look, I believe that every single action we do matters, even if it means only giving road directions.

Moreover, I have always been quite fit, and I also like being outdoors. I was looking for something that could give me a chance to be active because all the jobs I have had in my life have been quite sedentary and office-based. Over the years, I have always enjoyed the diversity of the tasks I have been given. There is never a dull moment, and this keeps me engaged and it keeps my mind (and my joints) flexible.

How did you get involved?

I got involved with the Garda Reserve in my third year of college. I applied for the position online and then went through a stage gate process, which entailed both physical and mental examinations and training. I remember that the application form was extremely detailed, and rightly so. For example, I was asked to provide exact details on every single place I and my immediate family members lived during my life. There was a level of scrutiny throughout the whole process, which also involved a written exam in which the applicants are given difficult scenarios to solve or to describe in a maximum of three sentences. Afterwards, I underwent two interviews during which my reactions were challenged. For example, I was asked if my friends or family would take it against me because I was a guard.

And how did you reply to that question?

I said that my friends would not do such a thing. That they would not



▲ Máire wielding a speed gun at a check point.

be my friends if they would. And the same goes for my family.

Are there any special requirements to become a member of this force?

Persons wishing to join the Garda Reserve must be between 18 and 60 years when they commence the prescribed training, and in general you must be in good health with good vision.

Until 2005, applicants had to be fluent in Irish, but that rule does not apply anymore. However, as a native Irish speaker myself, I can tell you that this requirement has proven to be extremely important over the years, especially when I get to work in the **Gaeltacht areas³**. Some years ago, I was out on duty during a boat festival in which **Galway Hookers⁴** were raced. Two brothers ran one of these wonderful boats, but there was an accident and one of them drowned. At the hospital, I had to break the news to his family and his surviving sibling. They came from Carna, one of the Gaeltacht areas in County Galway, so I knew they'd be more comfortable to go through

this extremely sad process in Irish. I believe it connected us at a deeper level when we communicated in their "soul language".

How do you deal with tragic or dangerous situations like the one you have just described? When you get home after your service, can you disconnect from what you experienced in the streets?

I think it is natural to be afraid or sad, but no matter what happens while I am on duty, I feel I am very much part of something bigger. In the Garda Reserve, there is a fantastic support network in place. In case I get involved in an accident, I always get a call from my sergeant or from the other colleagues from the An Garda Síochána who are present at the event with me. Some years ago, I was patrolling a demonstration in Galway and the participants broke down the barriers we had put up to contain the gathering. I ended up on my back on the ground. I was only about to get home after the accident when I received a phone call from my sergeant. He wanted to make sure that I was doing well.

For your information

1. The **Garda Síochána** is the national police service of the Republic of Ireland. The name, which is of Gaelic origin, means "guardians of the peace" in English.
2. Garda Reserves are volunteers, but they can apply for an allowance if they serve 280 hours per year. The allowance is currently €1,000 (\$1140.46) per year.
3. The term Gaeltacht is used to denote those areas in Ireland where the Irish language is, or was until the recent past, the main language spoken by the majority of the local population. This area covers extensive parts of the following counties: Donegal, Galway, and Kerry, as well as parts of Cork, Meath, and Waterford counties.
4. Galway Hookers are traditional fishing boats used in the bay of Galway, a town off the west coast of Ireland. Traditionally they are black as they are coated in pitch, and the sails are dark-red brown.

Sometimes these events stick within you, because there is always someone within the Reserve you can talk to. There is nothing too big that we cannot tackle together.

What do you admire the most in your Reserve colleagues?

My colleagues are so committed to their duties and responsibilities in the police force. Unlike what they show in movies and on TV, the bad guys do not always get convicted. They might have to be let go on a technicality. But my colleagues in the Reserve do not give up, and they do not become disillusioned either. I think they portray a message of true hope toward the future.

Moreover, my involvement with the Reserve continuously challenges all my pre-conceived notions, my bias. In other words, this experience teaches me to evolve as a human

being. And in this sense, my participation in the Reserve reminds me of the environment at Cook: we strive toward equality and equity, no matter what your background is or where you come from. We all work together toward a common goal, being it caring for patients or the good of our communities.

Another positive aspect I'd like to mention is that I have never felt discriminated against because of my sex. Irish history, like history in other countries, has not been kind to women who, up to some decades ago, were not even allowed to sit at the table. I feel that now things have changed. We can feel strong and open, and we do not have to feel sorry because we are independent.

- **Vanessa Marengo** (*Vanessa.Marengo@CookMedical.com*) is a Reimbursement manager based in Italy.



▲ Elements of Máire's Garda Reserve uniform including her hat, which is worn at all times, and epaulette, which is an ornamental shoulder piece.



▲ Another of Máire's epaulettes. The color changes to suit the jacket or top that is being worn. The GR stands for Garda Reserve, The GA stand for Galway, and 906 is her callsign number.



▲ The official Garda insignia on Máire's badge.