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*Ireland AM's Mark Cagney, Aidan Cooney, Sinead Desmond and Alan Hughes celebrate the show's 10th birthday in style...*

**the Breakfast club**

Ireland AM, Weekdays, TV3

## COVER STORY

For ten years now, they've made our mornings brighter. To celebrate this impressive milestone, **Janice Butler** spends some time over breakfast with the popular faces of *Ireland AM* – Mark Cagney, Aidan Cooney, Sinead Desmond and Alan Hughes



# Morning Glory

**"I**t's a huge big giant extended family – us and the viewers. Cheesy as that sounds, that's the reality", announces a remarkably fresh Sinead Desmond as her make-up is carefully applied for our photo-shoot.

"The concept of the show is a family, you have the mum and dad and the two brats!" interjects Mark Cagney, the 'daddy' presumably, as he lounges on a giant bed in the penthouse of a Dublin city hotel, hands clasped behind his head in preparation for a nap after a hard morning's work. "He's the artistic

type", he says, pointing to Alan Hughes, who's perched on the other end of the bed with a cup of tea. "And he's the gurrer", adds Mark – Aidan Cooney responds with a resigned chuckle. They say the family that prays together stays together; in this case, it seems to be the 'family' that works together.

The *Ireland AM* team, consisting of Mark Cagney, Aidan Cooney, Sinead Desmond and Alan Hughes, is one-of-a-kind: the only home-grown breakfast TV show. It was the brainchild of former TV3 CEO Rick Hetherington and came into existence just one year after TV3

was born. At its launch, people doubted its longevity; however, on the eve of their 10th birthday, the team's sense of accomplishment, pride and excitement is palpable as they happily chat on a sunny Tuesday morning.

"Mark and I started on the same day. We were breakfast virgins together!" laughs Alan. "Aidan came in about a year and a half later. I was doing the weather and some interviews which is what I still do but that role has expanded over the years. At that stage it was only from 7am – 9am."

"Then they wanted to extend it by half an hour and we said, 'okay grand' and 'how much extra money will there be?' and they said 'oh no there's no extra money'. I said 'well that's another half hour a day which works out at more than one day's programme a week and you're planning not to pay us any more – I don't think so!' So an arrangement was come to", adds Mark.

So sitting here now, ten years on, wiser and let's admit it a little bit older, did they ever think that the then small production would not only last as long as it has but become so successful?

"We thought if we were lucky we'd get two years out of it", responds Mark honestly.

"I remember about four months into it I was walking down the corridor with Amanda Byram and she seemed really upset; she kept bursting into tears. Then Alan came onto the scene wondering what was

### Alan Hughes' best moment

*I'm a huge soap fan so I love when we get to go over to Emmerdale and Corrie and meet the cast – they're always so nice. Barbara Knox, who plays Rita Sullivan on Coronation Street, gave me an interview once and she never does interviews, so I felt quite privileged. Things like that are great perks of the job.*

wrong and he started crying too. The three of us had a collective whinge”, he recalls.

“After three months of doing the show, the hours we were doing really kicked in, it was like three month jet-lag. Then we were thinking ‘can you actually physically do this for more than a year or two?’”

The small breakfast show studio was built out in TV3’s headquarters in Ballymount on the outskirts of Dublin, a by no means extravagant creation, as the presenters admit.

“When you see what’s there now, it’s hilarious to think back to what it

“After three months of doing the show, the hours we were doing really kicked in, it was like three month jet-lag. Then we were thinking can you actually physically do this for more than a year or two?”

Mark Cagney

was, especially the outside set. We literally had a wall with a bit of grass and a plastic bin, it was just a joke”, laughs Alan, the brains behind the now much-loved outdoor scenes.

“Aidan and I love getting outside – Mark wouldn’t leave the studio under pain of death”, he adds.

“The reason why the show has evolved so much is because it was cheap and cheerful at the start, we all knew that so we had to cover that by being human and people responded to it”, comments Mark.

For this foursome, those who have gone before and the extended Ireland AM team, waking at literally the crack of dawn (4am to be precise – ouch!) is just part of the job but certainly not one they relish or enjoy.

“From day one I knew that they would catch me if I fell. Mark especially, had to pick up the pieces for me in the first few months. You can’t hide on that show, you can’t pretend to be anything other than what you are, which I found really scary

Sinead Desmond

“It does consume your life because if you’re up at that hour of the morning, you have to go to bed so early, you simply can’t get around it. The one thing you can’t keep off your face is tiredness; you can disguise being drunk, being mad, but you cannot hide tiredness”, reveals Mark.

“I remember Mark telling me on the first day that you have to be really disciplined otherwise it will break you”, adds Sinead.

“He also said it would be tougher on me because I was a woman and I thought ‘sod you’ but he was absolutely right because you have to be there earlier every morning to get the hair and make-up done”, she says, as her false lashes are carefully applied.

The early starts not only plays havoc with their beauty sleep but for some of the presenters it was the ruination of personal relationships.

“It’s the graveyard of relationships”, says Alan, half laughing. “It’s really tough on your personal life. It was very difficult on mine. Your whole life revolves around going to bed early – you have no social life or time for anything else”, he adds.

“All of the girls have had to make choices that none of the men had to make. Maura Derrane had to make some difficult choices; Amanda [Byram] was seeing Patrick Kielty at the time and he was in London; and it created havoc for Claire Byrne – she was never comfortable with the early mornings”, reveals Mark.

The all-consuming nature of the show is perhaps the reason for the game of musical chairs with the female presenters over the past decade, some lasting longer than others. The show kicked off with Amanda Byram as Mark’s right-hand lady. She lasted a year, but then it was bye, bye Byram, as she jetted off for the bright lights of London. At the time she had to dispel rumours that she was quitting because of a rift with her co-host Mark. She said, “That’s ridiculous. We’re the best of mates. We spend

so much time together. We’re great buddies and we live in each other’s pockets. We’d have to like each other to spend that much time together. We got each other through a very difficult period. We started off in television together.”

According to Mark, she “always had a sparkle about her and you knew she was going to go onto bigger things.”

Amanda was replaced by another Irish beauty Emma Buckley; with her good looks, long blonde hair and blue eyes, she was set to send male pulses racing when she hit the nation’s TV screen. The former model and nutritionist only lasted a

Sinead Desmond's best moment

I remember laughing hysterically with Alan during a fashion piece and it got so bad that we couldn't even speak. It was an absolute train-wreck but the viewers loved it. The producers were killing us through our earpieces but the more they gave out the worse we got.

bring out the best in Ireland AM’s guests and she was right.

“When I first started I’d never done TV before. I was greener than green can be and I bet they were wondering what I was doing on the show”, admits Sinead.



Sinead does D&G; right: Aidan catches up with the news; below: when do breakfast TV hosts have breakfast?

year in the spotlight and now works for NBC in the US.

In 2001, Claire Byrne took up the baton for two years, followed by Maura Derrane and a few in-between, including Gráinne Seoige. Finally in 2006, it seemed they had found ‘the one’ – enter Sinead Desmond. The then 33-year-old from Killiney had completed her journalism degree in the UK and worked on numerous newspapers both at home and abroad. At the time she felt her training in print and love of people would help her

Mark Cagney's best moment

I really enjoyed the Larry Hagman interview; he was outrageously funny. We did a Dallas quiz and he couldn't answer any of the questions because he said he was drunk the whole time that he did that show. But it's the ordinary human beings that do extraordinary things that really impress you.

Ireland AM, Weekdays, TV3

# COVER STORY

"But from day one I knew that they would catch me if I fell. Mark especially, had to pick up the pieces for me in the first few months. You can't hide on that show, you can't pretend to be anything other than what you are, which I found really scary. If people don't like you, you can be sure they'll tell you."

Just over a year ago, on a normal

## Aidan Cooney's best moment

*Meeting Padraig Harrington at home was great! We called to his house around Christmas time and he'd forgotten we were coming out, he answered the door in his dressing gown. We said we would come back another day but he insisted that we come in and do the interview. He was such a gentleman.*

bustling Tuesday morning on the Ireland AM set, the team was thrown into a state of shock when a seemingly healthy Sinead collapsed after suffering a minor brain haemorrhage.

"That had personal resonance for me and it really unhinged me for a couple of weeks", reveals a sombre Mark, whose first wife Ann died of the same condition.

"I'd been through that before and I never thought I'd go through it again. All we kept thinking was

another couple of seconds and she mightn't have made it."

"I was feeling fine", says Sinead. "It was a normal morning, Mark and I were chatting away and I just had a headache."

"Next thing she's over in the corner lying on the ground", interjects Mark. "We didn't know if maybe she hadn't eaten or if it was meningitis because the lights were hurting her eyes."

Thankfully, Sinead made a full recovery and is feeling (and looking) better than ever. She says she's still on a high from her ridiculously romantic French wedding to Davie Ryan during the summer.

So after ten years of highs and lows, trials and tribulations, tears and tantrums, do they feel they have achieved the respect and acknowledgment of their peers, that it seems they have been a long time seeking?

"I think that anybody who presents television will understand what we do and the effort that goes into it", remarks Aidan, finally managing to get a word in.

"In the early days we did measure

ourselves against RTÉ; we were always wondering when were they going to put on a breakfast show but after a while we realised it was the BBC and ITV we were up against and we surpassed them years ago", says Mark, triumphantly.

**"It's really tough on your personal life. It was very difficult on mine. Your whole life revolves around going to bed early – you have no social life or time for anything else"**

Alan Hughes



"I think that anybody who presents television will understand what we do and the effort that goes into it" - Aidan Cooney



Above, Sinead glams up with a Roland Mouret number; below, does Alan really need any help getting dressed up?



So as a rail of beautiful clothes arrives for Sinead, along with some very dapper suits for the men, there's really only time for one more question before they dash off to check out their threads – another ten years perhaps?

"The show will certainly be there but we might not", answers Mark.

"Why wouldn't we?" questions Sinead.

"Lets put it like this", concludes 'daddy' Mark. "It's the best team we'll ever play for to use a sporting analogy. We were all successful individually beforehand, so in our own heads we all think we're capable of doing this show on our own but the fact of the matter is, it's the combination of the four together that works a treat."



Times aren't really that tough at Ireland's favourite breakfast show



Styling by Roxanne Parker, [www.roxanneparker.com](http://www.roxanneparker.com)  
Hair by Paula Cahill from Hession Hairdressing. Their new salon is now open at 4 Vernon Avenue, Clontarf, Dublin 3. To book an appointment telephone 01-883 0110 or visit [www.hessionhairdressing.com](http://www.hessionhairdressing.com)  
Make-up by Kate Rose Crean, Tel: 087-961 5558  
Shot on location in the penthouse of the Morgan Hotel, Fleet St. Temple Bar, Dublin. Tel: 01-643 7000. For details of their latest special offers go to [www.themorgan.com](http://www.themorgan.com)

**Cover shot:** Sinead wears: Traverse 'chalk' coloured dress, €1,635, RM by Roland Mouret from Costume, Castle Market, Dublin 2. Black patent shoes, €435, Christian Dior, The Shoe Rooms, Brown Thomas. Aidan Cooney wears: Suit and tie from Louis Copeland, 90 Lower Pembroke Street, Dublin 2, Tel: 01-661 0110 or [www.louiscopeand.com](http://www.louiscopeand.com) Shirt, €35, M&S, shoes, €69, M&S. Alan Hughes wears: Navy Suit and striped tie from Louis Copeland, Pembroke Street, shirt, €35, M&S, shoes, €69, M&S. Mark, Cagney

wears: Pinstriped suit, Louis Copeland, 39 Capel St, Dublin, tel: 01-8721600. Tie, Louis Copeland, Shirt, €35, M&S; shoes own.  
Red Hampton rug €39.99, from IKEA Dublin, for more information go to [www.ikea.com/ie](http://www.ikea.com/ie)  
Red DeLonghi toaster, €85, House of Fraser, Dundrum Town Centre  
Red DeLonghi kettle, €65, House of Fraser, Dundrum Town Centre. Plates, alarm clock, photo frame and Marilyn Monroe chopping board all from House of Fraser.

**Shot 2:** Sinead wears: black and white houndstooth dress, €1,145, Dolce&Gabbana, Brown Thomas. Red patent shoes, €435, Christian Dior, The Shoe Rooms Brown Thomas.  
Alan wears: same as before, tie - his own  
**Shot 2:** Sinead wears: Black 'Scirocco' dress, €1,295, by Roland Mouret, Costume, Castle Market, D2. Shoes, as before.