

# autistic children



**PIONEERS:** The families who took part in the pilot project at the Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind centre, with Ken Brydon (centre) and Cliona O'Rourke (left), who spearheaded the programme and Wade Beattie (right), who came from National Service Dogs in Canada to oversee the work

## How service can help the families

- Increase safety levels for the children.
- Improve child's behaviour and socialisation skills by acting as a constant companion for the child.
- Create freedom for the child and family members to go out of the house.
- Expand a child's capabilities to experience more of life and to grow.
- Calm children, thereby giving them an increased attention span and greater aptitude for learning.
- Reduce stress and the reliance on medication.

model on which the Irish project is based. The Irish project is the first in Europe — and apart from Canada, the only other one is in the US.

Mary O'Dowd, an IGDB puppy-walker who used to work with autistic children, has also had a valuable input in the pilot project.

The next step will see parents from Dublin take part in the Assistance Dogs Programme.

A decision will then be taken in

the summer as to whether to roll out the scheme nationwide in the same way as the service to blind and partially sighted people.

Charlie Daly, Chairman of IGDB, said: "We are delighted we have the opportunity to undertake this pilot programme. We can do so only because we have achieved the unconditional support of families of children with autism, our own staff and the generosity of our funders."



**OUT FOR A STROLL:** Assistance dog Eve with three-year-old Sarah, her mum Noelle and brother Adam.

## SALUTE TO PUPPY WALKERS

THE three dogs involved in the Pilot New Assistance Dogs Programme scheme were as follows:

**Eve:** Puppy walked by Stephanie Twomey of Blackrock, Cork.

**Art:** Puppy walked by Simon and Jackie Murphy of Waterford.

**Bonnie:** Puppy walked by Mary and Gerard Fitzgerald of Kerry.

## O'Shea on Monday

robert.oshea@eecho.ie



RELIGIOUS pareidolia was the subject of this column a few months back and I, for one, thought it would never rear its ugly head again. Pareidolia, we may recall (turn to issue 32,554), is the ability of the human eye to make images out of randomness. Often, natural occurrences such as the weather or the build-up of chemical residues can cause us to see things that are not there, eg speech bubbles while conducting a conversation. Back in November, I brought to your attention the story of one Florida woman's brave crusade to convince the people of the world that the Virgin Mary had appeared in her toasted cheese sandwich, and her attempt to sell that sandwich on the internet for \$20,000.

This week's exciting story comes from a lot closer to home.

### Saturday, April 2, Nenagh town

Mary Ward, grandmother to four, is sitting in the Cut 'n' Dye salon, having her highlights done. A black nylon gown covers her torso. She looks down at her lap and sees His Holiness Pope John Paul II smiling at her. Tracey, a hairdresser, on looking into Mrs Ward's lap, exclaims: "Oh my God, it's the Pope." A few of the other girls working in the hair salon also claim to see it and the image stays there for around 15 minutes. Now a lot of readers who know my reputation (as the reporter who uncovered the strings attached to the statue in Ballinspittle) would expect me in some way to maybe make fun of this woman and her crazy story.

But who are we to say we know about the mysteries of the great beyond? Indeed, I might be more sceptical if I myself had not had a religious vision while seated in a barber's chair not too long ago.

It was late afternoon and I was in a barbershop I had never been to before. I was getting my head shaved — a number four. My haircuts usually take approximately four-six minutes and the lady who was shaving my head and I had already run through the etiquette haircutting conversation (weather: nice; holidays: none decided yet).

I was in dreamland, watching my old hair cascade to the floor, when I heard the lady say something that I didn't quite catch. I looked up for her in the mirror, but something else caught my eye first. A halo. Around my head! For a few brief seconds I was a witness to my own sainthood. I sat there transfixed; I could actually sense the Hallelujahs reverberating and rising within me.

The hairdresser was saying something though, and I deigned to hear it. Did she see it too, I wondered? No, she seemed to be saying: "Is the back all right?"

Fool. Fool, I thought. The round mirror she was holding to the back of my crown had somehow, through the prism of mirrors in the place, caught hold of the brilliant rays of the golden setting sun outside the window and shone them on me from behind.

"Is the back all right?" she repeated, deflating my deification with her tone of voice.

"Yep," I said. "Grand." In fairness, the only times I ever see the back of my head is in a hairdresser's or barber's after a cut, so I never could really offer any intelligent criticism even if I wanted to.

But — and I must tell you that this is the main crux of this week's column here — that 'haircut' cost me more than €10.

Now I wouldn't have minded that price so much, but the hairdresser in question couldn't even get my sideburns straight. My instructions had been: shorten them, tidy them up. I thought that having them measuring up somewhat similarly on either side was pretty implicit in that deal. Apparently not, because when I got home I found that the left lock hung at least one centimetre (that's long in sideburn stakes) below the right one.

A little DIY work with the razor would be required to sort it.

Pretty soon all evidence of sideburns had gone and I was shaving into the main body of hair. I'd have kept going up too, until I was completely bald I'd say, but then, two-an-a-half-centimetres above and behind my left ear, I made a pretty startling discovery.

It was the numeral 6.