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Irishman and SmartICE social enterprise co-creator Trevor Bell takes on 20 Questions

He came here from Ireland on a 'gut reaction' more than 25 years ago and is glad he did

[Evan Careen](#) · [Multimedia journalist](#) | Posted: 15 hours ago | Updated: 10 minutes ago | 8 Min Read



Trevor Bell, founding director of SmartICE, said the program to train Inuit youth on how to use satellite imagery and local knowledge to make sea ice safe travel maps came out of a need identified by the Inuit communities they service. - SaltWire Network file photo

ST. JOHN'S, N.L. — When Trevor Bell first visited the more northern reaches of the province, he never expected it would play such an important role in his life.

He came to Newfoundland and Labrador from Ireland in 1984 to study and, outside of a five-year stint in Alberta, has made the province his home ever since.

Within only a few months of his arrival in Canada, he was in the Torngat Mountains. He said when he first went to Labrador, he was the classic scientist going north, travelling through community airports, not really interacting with the people.

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“It was a gradual evolution. I had mentors show me there were other ways to work in the north, with communities, asking the community ‘what can I do for you?’” he said.

“Service to community was very important in my family, so I kind of extended that to my career, doing research that mattered to communities.”

Bell, a geography professor at Memorial University and fellow of both the Royal Society of Canada and the Royal Canadian Geographical Society, has done extensive work in Labrador, on the Great Northern Peninsula and in the Arctic.

“Service to community was very important in my family, so I kind of extended that to my career, doing research that mattered to communities.” — Trevor Bell

He is also the co-creator and director of [SmartICE](#), an award-winning social enterprise that uses technology and traditional Inuit knowledge to track changing sea ice in the north and provides socio-economic benefits to the communities in which it operates. The enterprise was created at Memorial through work Bell was doing with the Nunatsiavut Government.

Bell was recently honoured for his work on SmartICE by with the inaugural Frederik Paulsen Arctic Academic Action Award, presented by the University of the Arctic and the Iceland-based organization, the Arctic Circle.

The award, valued at €100,000, is to acknowledge action-oriented scientific initiatives designed to improve and reverse the effects of climate change in a concrete way.

It isn't the first accolade he has received for his work with SmartICE — he has two Arctic Inspiration Prizes, known as the "Nobel of the north" and in 2019, Bell and SmartICE received the prestigious Governor General's Innovation Award.

With the climate changing and changes to sea ice happening more rapidly, he said it's important to have initiatives like SmartICE, which helps collaboratively make life safer for the Inuit who use the sea ice.

His work has taken him to many beautiful and remote parts of the province and the country, an experience Bell said has been a privilege.

“Being able to do that, 25 years of walking the landscapes of Newfoundland and the Canadian North, it's been a real privilege to be able to do that. I often tell my students I have the best job in the world.”

20 Questions

1. What is your full name?

Trevor James Bell.

2. Where and when were you born?

In 1961, at the Cottage Hospital in Drogheda (Ireland), although my family lived in nearby Dundalk.

3. Where do you live today?

St. John's.

4. What's your favourite place in the world?

At our cabin in Caplin Cove, Hant's Harbour.

5. Who do you follow on social media?

I don't really do social media. I prefer chatting directly with people.

6. What would people be surprised to learn about you?

Just how much of my life and career decisions were based on gut reactions. I first decided to move to Newfoundland (in the middle of the 1984 ice storm) from Ireland without even knowing where it was in Canada. My whole generation scrambled to leave Ireland and \$5,000 a year from MUN to live on while studying for my masters degree felt like a good opportunity. I have always been an accidental academic. I was the first in my family to attend university and I suppose I had no one to tell me when to leave. As a geographer. I have welcomed opportunities to explore important questions across the province, especially those of concern to communities.

7. What's been your favourite year and why?

That's a tough question as each year brings new exciting challenges and opportunities and I have experienced lots of great years in my life. Even last year with the COVID-19 pandemic, our travel restrictions and health guidelines meant a more simple life, with lots of local walking and biking and a renewed appreciation for what is important.

8. What is the hardest thing you've ever done?

Two experiences come to mind. Caring for my eldest son, Kevin, immediately after surgery for a ruptured appendix was emotionally tough waiting for a favourable outcome. But in the end, he pulled through and remains healthy today. Finishing my second Cape-to-Cabot run was brutal. The climb up Signal Hill to finish the race was my hardest physical challenge ever, especially with a bronchial infection as I later found out.

9. Can you describe one experience that changed your life?

The particular day when Indigenous youth suicide really struck home personally for me was also the day when I decided to devote my remaining university career to action-oriented research for the wellbeing of Indigenous communities.

10. What's your greatest indulgence?

Weekend mornings with fresh espresso coffee made from Trinity Coffee Company beans, toasted Coleman's Artisan Cranberry Pumpkin Seed bread, and a healthy serving of our homemade berry jam. In bed!

11. What is your favourite movie or book?

I love reading and these three books affected me in memorable ways: "A Fine Balance" by Rohinton Mistry; "All the Light We Cannot See" by Anthony Doerr; and "The Time Traveler's Wife" by Audrey Niffenegger.

12. How do you like to relax?

Outside hiking, cycling, and kayaking with Gillian (my wife) and friends. Inside playing soccer with the master's elite crowd and learning to curl.

13. What are you reading or watching right now?

"Shtisel" on Netflix takes me into a different culture with new traditions and language. Getting lost in "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry" by Gabrielle Charbonnet is well worth it.

14. What is your greatest fear?

I have a fear of heights, plain and simple. It is not generally an issue except when alpine hiking along razor sharp ridges with serious drop-offs on either side, situations I find myself in more often than I care to!

15. How would you describe your personal fashion statement?

Comfort over style; if in doubt, informal; not too much denim.

16. What is your most treasured possession?

Our cabin. I have invested a lot of sweat equity in our “house around the bay” and it represents a special place for our family. It is as much mental as physical space.

17. What physical or personality trait are you most grateful to a parent for?

I inherited the work ethic of my parents, and the commitment to community from my mother.

18. What three people would join you for your dream dinner party?

Peter Gzowski, Jürgen Klopp and Roddy Doyle.

19. What is your best quality, and what is your worst quality?

I love listening to people, especially hearing them being passionate. When I see something that needs to be done, I do it. I am a “man of action,” my wife Gillian likes to say. However, inaction drives me crazy, especially when something could and should be done. But I suppose I could be less impatient and more tolerant in those situations...but why?

20. What’s your biggest regret?

When I first came to Newfoundland and Canada, Peter Gzowski on Morningside was my regular guide. I have clear memories of listening to him and his guests while waiting for the No. 3 bus on Water Street. When I got an opportunity to meet him much later at a book signing in Edmonton, I clammed up. I regret not finding the words to tell him what his show truly meant to me as a new immigrant. The experience has taught me not to hesitate, to speak up, because some opportunities only come once in a lifetime.