



SKILLED: Michael Morris

Toy Story a big hit for carpenter

BY STEPHEN DUNNE

IT'S A case of 'honey, I shrunk the farm' for one canny carpenter who has turned his hand to making fabulous mini models to ride out the recession. My Toy Crafts was born when Michael Morris, from Tinahealy, Co. Wicklow, began making scale models of farmyards after the worst of the downturn hit the construction industry last year. "Work completely dried up around April and I had to do something with myself," said Morris, who has been travelling to agricultural shows to sell his new wares in an attempt to make ends meet.

"I'd made a couple of these for my girlfriend's brothers and they turned out well. I decided to start making them to see if I could earn a living with them."

Luck

The down-on-his-luck carpenter researched model making online, equipped himself with a workshop in his backyard shed and then decided to make it his business to recreate the Irish farmyard in all its glory - only in miniature size.

While Morris says he isn't making a living yet from the models, which include doll houses and custom-made castles, he is attracting attention from farmers - including one in Offaly who wants a scale model of his whole farm.

"It can take anything from 20 minutes to a day or two to make a building, so it can take some time to make a full farm model. The likes of a stables or a milking parlour can take a day or more to do," he said.

"The idea is that they are built for strength and reliability. Hopefully I can make more of a living out of it, I really enjoy the work although it is quite painstaking at times."

More examples of the Wicklow man's work can be viewed at mytoy crafts.ie.

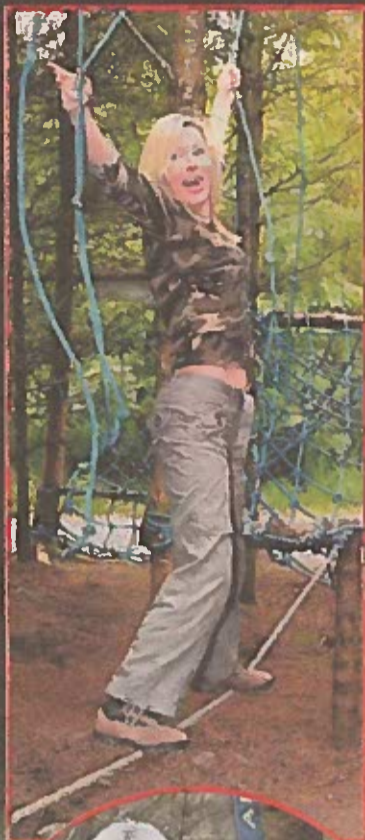
FUNDAY WORLD

A hotel guest who let his 5ft pet python roam loose in a Holiday Inn has been fined €50 under animal control laws in Iowa, USA. "The man was a guest, the snake was not," said the manager.

EXCLUSIVE BOOT CAMP BABE GETS

OUR GIRL GOES

Geraldine goes from girl on the town to GI



IT WAS meant to be a survival course.

But when the boss signed me up to Extreme Boot Camp, I thought he was trying to get rid of me.

This was nothing like the genteel, weight-loss boot-camps which are popping up in public parks all over the country.

I was packed off the wilds of County Meath to learn how to survive in... well, the wild.

Loughcrew Adventure Centre, near Oldcastle, is set in the grounds of a stately house - but it's three miles from the nearest pub, chipper or hotel.

And I nearly did a runner when I heard my instructor was to be Ireland's very own Bear Grylls.

I'd rather face 'Fatfighters' boss Marjorie Dawes of TV's Little Britain than ex-Army sergeant Patsy Sweeney. And I'm sure he was equally daunted by his task - to turn me into GI-Jane in one afternoon.

Well, it was supposed to take a week, but as the only exercise I get is tottering around the shops in stilettos, and I still haven't used a gym membership I got as a gift before Christmas, I convinced Patsy



that it would be a Mission Impossible.

"Then we'll just have to give you a crash course," he said with a wicked grin.

He barked at me to jump off a platform 50 feet above the ground. I was attached to a zip wire and harness, but was still terrified as I went flying through the air.

Fear

Just when I had got over the fear, Patsy ordered me to climb a massive wooden structure - and abseil down the other side.

But Patsy had a great climbing tip: "Stick your bum out so you are far away from the wall - that way you'll see where you're putting your feet."

Just as I was beginning to think this was a cinch, Patsy ordered me to walk a tightrope - high above a murky pond.

Patsy built his obstacle course from scratch just four months ago.

"I built it with my own hands. I cut into the woods with a saw. I designed some of

the obstacles myself, the rest I adapted from my days in the army," he explained.

It was a labour of love for him - but it was hell for me.

I spent an afternoon climbing ropes and nets, swinging by my arms out of horizontal ladders and limbo-dancing through mazes made up of tree-branches without bumping into anything.

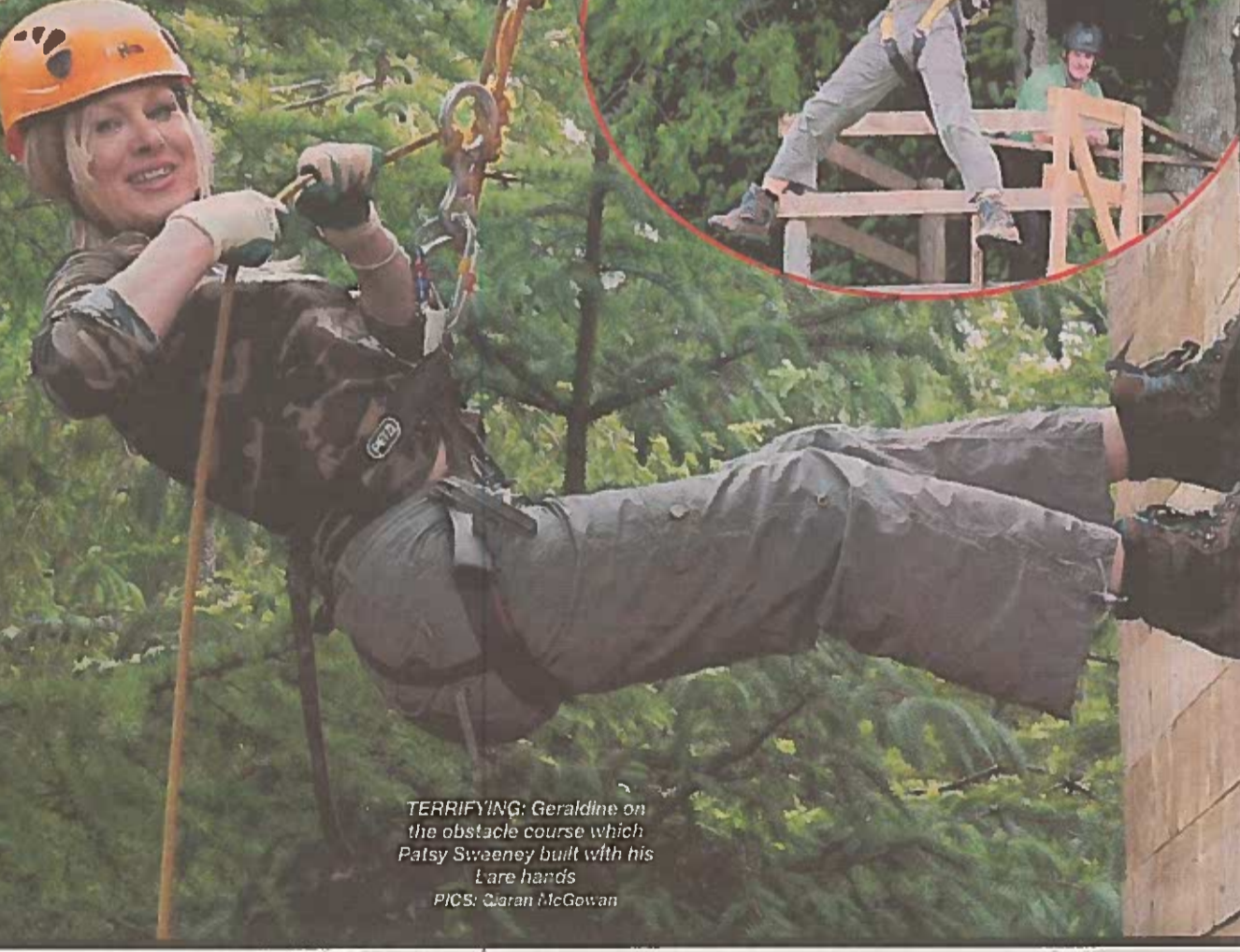
But I wasn't out of the woods yet - I still had to do the Robin Hood bit. Last time I had used a bow and arrow was with a group of traditional archers in Longford. I was crap then - and I still am. My arrows plummeted forlornly to the ground right in front of me. One actually landed at my feet.

After what seemed like ages, I eventually hit the target - well, the outer edge of the giant board right in front of me.

Next up was a series of mind-boggling brain-teasers. I tried to piece a jigsaw together and stack wooden discs in the correct order - no mean feat when your hands are shaking from adrenalin.

But my adventure was not over as Patsy had promised to teach me 'bushcraft'.

I got a bit worried when he compared himself to Crocodile Dundee, but I breathed a sigh of relief when I spotted a big white tent which looked very civilised. It turned out it was for the Garden



WORKOUT: Geraldine takes on the challenge at Adventure Centre

TERRIFYING: Geraldine on the obstacle course which Patsy Sweeney built with his bare hands

PICS: Claran McGowan