



**I'm an Adult Learner 2016**  
*Inspiring learner stories  
from across Ireland*



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**Note:** Throughout this publication many learners refer to QQI: Quality and Qualifications Ireland (Eg QQI Level 5 course in healthcare). In the area of qualifications they are the awarding body of the ten-level NFQ (National Framework of Qualifications). QQI validates education and training programmes and makes a range of awards in the further and higher education and training sector. Some programmes run by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) for example, lead to QQI awards.

“

*Through the stories and experiences of individual learners  
the true value of adult learning can be communicated.*

*These stories are essential to promote the benefits  
of adult learning and to highlight the way in which  
adult learning can transform the lives of ordinary people.*

”

**AONTAS Seminar:  
Engaging the Learner Voice report, April 2015**

## FOREWORD

Every year many adults begin their journey back to education. For somebody who may have been out of formal education for a long time, or who had negative educational experiences in the past, it can be a hugely daunting step. However, there is help at hand and a wide range of courses where learners can ease themselves back into education with an interest course or go straight into a full-time accredited programme.

AONTAS is Ireland's national adult learning organisation. As well as providing information to adults who are looking to return to education, we promote the value and benefits of adult learning, and advocate on behalf of the sector. As an independent non-governmental association, AONTAS has nearly 500 members nationwide. Currently, there are 339,000 SOLAS funded beneficiaries who engage in adult learning across each of the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs), and many more adult learners engage in lifelong learning in a variety of settings including at higher level. These courses include basic education, skills training, access and higher education and personal development programmes.

Details about the range of courses in further education and training are available on the new website: [www.fetchcourses.ie](http://www.fetchcourses.ie). Support for navigating the range of options is provided by local adult education guidance services at: [www.aegai.ie](http://www.aegai.ie).

Ireland is leading the way in making a commitment to learner representation at both a national and regional level. The Government committed to the establishment of a forum for adult learners in the Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy, published by SOLAS in 2014. For the first time, a formal structure now exists where adult learners are given the unique opportunity to influence the policy decisions that affect them. AONTAS is leading out on this exciting new development which means that learners are now placed at the heart of the FET service.

In 2016 AONTAS launched a promotional campaign entitled **#ImAnAdultLearner**. The aim of the campaign was to share inspiring learner stories to encourage others to return to education. These stories highlighted the impact that education can have in transforming people's lives.

From Sharon in Dublin who did a personal development course through a community education centre and progressed to third level, to Tony in Leitrim who gained a skills focussed qualification through his local Enterprise Centre. Every Monday AONTAS has shared learner stories using the hashtag **#MondayMotivation** on our social media platforms and through the AONTAS website on [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com). As National Coordinator for the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL), we have decided to launch this publication as part of the European Vocational Skills Week (5<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup>, December 2016).

A recurring theme that arose from these stories was how daunting it can be to return to learning as an adult, especially for those that had a negative experience of formal education first time around. Many learners feel relieved once they realise that their life experiences are acknowledged. When returning to learning there can often be an initial feeling of being 'found out' and uncertainty that they should be there but then they realise that everyone in the class often feels the same way. Many learners refer to the fantastic tutor support that they experience when returning to education and how it is essential in supporting them to complete the course. Through these positive experiences adults are forging new career

paths and learning new skills. However the benefits are not confined to jobs and skills, they are far wider and can include increased confidence, being able to help their children with their homework and improved mental health.

The learner stories documented in this book clearly demonstrate the transformative effect that education can have on individuals, families and communities. However, Ireland's lifelong learning participation rate is just 7.2% which lags behind our European counterparts. AONTAS welcomes the Action Plan for Education (2016-2019) which has a lifelong learning participation rate target of 10% by 2020, however it is not good enough to simply increase participation rates. We need to widen participation to include people who have experienced significant educational disadvantage.

The recent European Commission Education and Training Monitor (2015) highlighted the gap between lifelong learning participation rates- people who have a high level of education are four times more likely to participate than those without a Leaving Certificate standard of education.

Furthermore, the European-wide research study, BeLL, noted that those with the lowest levels of education benefit most from lifelong learning (2014). Adult and community education is key to widening lifelong learning participation and is essential for tackling educational inequality.



There are still barriers that remain which prevent adults from accessing education including the cost of education; family commitments; low self-confidence; access to information; and entry requirements. If we are going to widen participation in adult learning, we must address these barriers. There is no one-size fits all approach to engaging all learners. Using a variety of approaches that support meaningful learner participation in lifelong learning has proven to be successful.

I would like to sincerely thank all of the learners who contributed to this book. I have no doubt that their stories will encourage and inspire other adults to take that first step on their learning journey.

We look forward to sharing more inspiring learner stories with you in 2017.

**Niamh O'Reilly**  
**CEO, AONTAS**

# LEARNER VOICE

*“Learner Voice” is about empowering learners by providing appropriate ways of listening to their concerns, interests and needs in order to develop educational experiences best suited to those individuals.”*

**Walker and Logan, 2008**

Learners are central to the work of AONTAS and we believe that their experiences provide key first-hand information which should inform the development of the services and policies which affect their learning. AONTAS believes that for representation of learners in the sector to be effective it must be underpinned by two actions: supporting learners themselves to become advocates, and supporting the development of learner voice structures at local level.

AONTAS has supported a number of learners to become advocates and raise their voice on the importance of adult learning- Alan Hand is one such learner. Alan shared his experience of returning to learning at the National Adult Learner Forum which took place in the Mansion House, Dublin in February 2016. He has taken part in a number of high profile media interviews throughout the year

and will represent learners at the European Commission’s Adult Skills Conference in Brussels during the European Vocational Skills Week. Adult learners are now being represented and influencing policy at local, national and European level.

## ALAN HAND

### Place of Learning

Abbeyleix Further Education Centre,  
Laois & Offaly Education and Training  
Board (LOETB), Co Laois

### Theme

Learner Voice



“

*We'll have another day  
at the fair*

”

I left school early at sixteen. As the eldest boy in the family, I always found work plentiful, you could open the Evening Herald any night of the week and there would be two or three pages of vacant jobs.

However, at the age of thirty seven I found myself unemployed and you have to make calls in life, you have to try and plot the best road map, a new way forward. In my case I decided to visit my local Education and Training Board (ETB) in Abbeyleix, County Laois. It was a dedicated centre for adult learning and I signed up to the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), which offered me the opportunity to receive my job seekers payment for doing a full time course.

It gave me somewhere to go every day, plus it allowed me some time to plot my next move, whether that be third level, employment or further learning.

## ***“Adults are not taking their situations lying down”***

There has been a quiet revolution going on around the country in the field of adult education. Adults the length and breadth of this country are going to their local ETBs, they're putting their names down for courses, they're looking at their options. Adults are not taking their situations lying down, they're upskilling, they're getting new qualifications and they're preparing themselves for future employment opportunities. There's an old Irish phrase and it goes like this: “Beidh an lá eile againn ag an aonach” which means “we'll have another day at the fair” - essentially a second chance.

## ***“How many people at sixteen or seventeen knew what they wanted to do?”***

People from underprivileged backgrounds have found themselves in situations where it has been tough to access education for a variety of circumstances. At sixteen or seventeen years of age many people in this country have to make a decision about their future. How many people at sixteen or seventeen knew what they wanted to do? It's a very tough decision to put on young

people and inevitably people fall through the cracks, people slip through the net. For those of us that do slip through the net we do get a second chance. I'm sitting the Leaving Certificate in June through VTOS and I would certainly encourage people to avail of it.

If there are any adult learners trying to decide whether or not to do it, I would say go and do it. It's the best decision you'll ever make. It's empowering, it will boost morale and people's self-confidence.

# POSITIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

A welcoming educational environment is so important for learners, especially for those who had negative past experiences of education or may have left school early.

There is sometimes a perception that learning is only for the young but the benefits of learning and achieving your potential can happen at any age – you're never too old.

A quality learning experience can lead to successful outcomes for learners and as told in many of the following stories, supportive tutors and peers are a central part of this. Returning to education is completely different to people's experiences of school – your opinion is valued along with your life experiences.

The following learners share their positive learning experiences.

# JOHN DOYLE

## Place of Learning

Portarlinton Further Education College,  
Laois & Offaly Education and  
Training Board (LOETB), Co Laois

## Theme

Positive Learning Experience

*“If you couldn’t keep up,  
then you never caught up”*

## ***“My first experience of education was negative”***

My first experience of education was negative as there were no supports or assessments in place to help with learning difficulties and teachers didn’t have the time to give you one to one support. If you couldn’t keep up, then you never caught up. I was also bullied for years in school, which had a long-term effect on me.

## ***“I needed to upskill and rebuild my confidence”***

I have always battled with depression but I was good at managing it as I knew the signs to look out for. I worked in the retail sector for over thirty years but two years ago everything just got too much for me and I needed to leave my job. I was very lucky to have such a supportive partner but there was an added financial strain as I was out of work. I wanted to return to employment but my self-esteem was at an all-time low. I really wanted a career change but for this I needed to upskill and rebuild my confidence.

***“I would like to see adult education centres link with employers”***

I heard of the Back to Education Allowance and decided to apply for it so I could access further education and training. When I secured the allowance, I applied for a Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) course. I recently completed my course and with my new qualification, skills and confidence I hope to gain employment soon. If my financial situation improves I would love to continue my education. I would like to see adult education centres link in with employers as I feel this would be useful to create job opportunities, especially coming near the end of your exams.

***“The first step is the hardest”***

I would highly recommend returning to education. The first step is the hardest- walking into the centre on the first day can be terrifying but it's not like it was years ago. The tutors are there to help you and they care about you. There is no shame in returning to education.

## ANDREW CORISH

### Place of Learning

Ashbourne Youthreach, Louth & Meath  
Education and Training Board (LMETB),  
Co Meath

### Theme

Positive Learning Experience

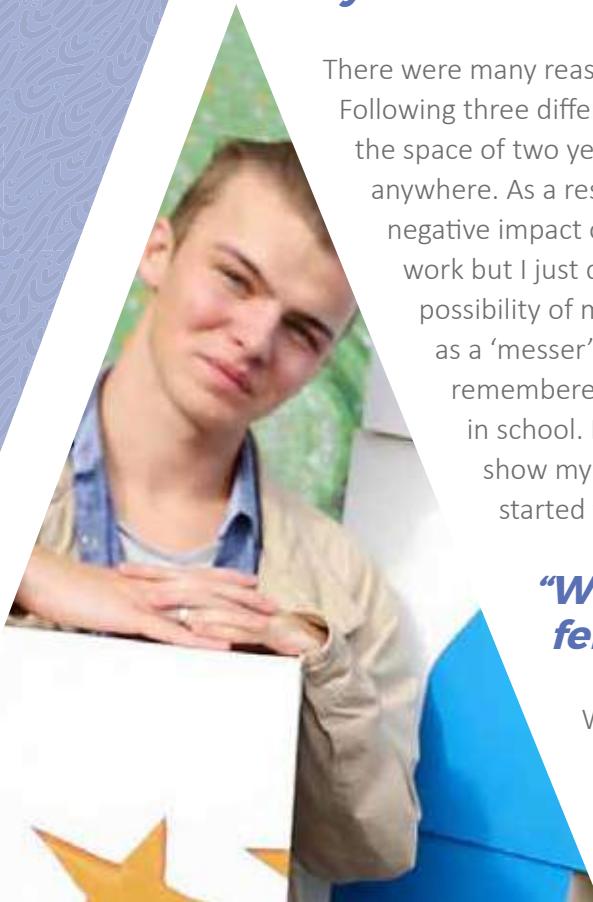
*“ In Youthreach,  
I can be the real me ”*

### ***“I found it extremely difficult to settle anywhere”***

There were many reasons why I chose to attend Youthreach. Following three different moves from mainstream schools in the space of two years, I found it extremely difficult to settle anywhere. As a result, I missed a lot of school which had a negative impact on my grades. I knew I had the ability to do the work but I just didn't put in the effort, as there was always the possibility of moving again. Then I was automatically labelled as a 'messenger'. I think it was mostly because the teachers remembered the behaviour of my siblings when they were in school. I felt that I was never given an opportunity to show my true ability so I didn't do my homework and started to skip classes.

### ***“When I began Youthreach, I felt I could be the real me”***

When I began Youthreach, I felt I could be the real me with no labelling or stereotyping.



It gave me a second chance and showed me the importance of education. A key difference of my experience was the strong relationships that we built with the teachers. This supportive approach meant that we could ask questions and smaller class sizes made it easier to learn. There was no feeling of superiority among learners as everyone was there for the same reason – to learn. I have really benefited from attending Youthreach. My grades have improved, I have made new friends and through this experience, I know that learning doesn't always have to be so black and white. There is more than one way for someone to learn on a level that suits them.

***“You're always welcome and treated equally”***

Youthreach has provided me with a supportive learning environment with teachers who want to see their students do well. No matter what religion, race, or sexuality you are, there is no discrimination.

You're always welcome and treated equally. Sometimes there is a stigma attached to Youthreach and people have a negative opinion that it's for 'dropouts'. This is not the case. It's a valuable option for people like me who find that mainstream school just didn't suit their needs. The great relationship between staff and students has made learning so much easier and enjoyable.

## UNA BUCKLEY

Place of Learning  
All Hallows College, Dublin

Theme  
Positive Learning Experience

“*I have finally obtained my ‘deferred dream’*”

Una shared her story at the first National Adult Learner Forum that took place in Dublin in February 2016.

***“Becoming a teacher was a dream that stayed with me for many years”***

As a child when anyone asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up my answer was always a teacher. This is a dream that stayed with me for many years. Unfortunately, my parents separated when I was 16 and as the eldest, I became the breadwinner for the family. I left school and held three jobs and this instilled in me a very strong work ethic. The years passed by and I met my husband, bought a little house and then a bigger one, had two fantastic children and through all this I continued to work full-time. I loved my job and teaching became a distant dream.

***“Not only did we learn, we had so much fun”***

Nine years ago, while reading a line in a book that asked:

**#ImAnAdultLearner**

'What happened to your childhood dreams?' – My answer was, 'nothing'. I had never taken any action to make my dreams come true.

I felt I was now too old and that you had to be brainy and intelligent to go to college or university. But the thought just wouldn't go away, and as if by fate, I bought a local newspaper which had an ad for a QQI Level 6 course in adult and community education, an outreach programme from Maynooth University, taking place in Tallaght. I applied for the course and during my interview I felt I had 'blown' it so I gave them my 'I had a dream' speech and I got a place on the course. I was extremely nervous and thought it would be like going back to school but I got such a shock when I went into the room. The teachers were sitting with the learners and I realised it wasn't like school at all. I loved every minute of it. Not only did we learn, we had so much fun.

### ***"Your whole life experience is unique and has value"***

The main thing I learned from this course was that adults learn from one another. I never felt good enough because I left school at 16. Now I know that it doesn't matter when you left school or your background. You have so much more to offer; your whole life experience is unique and has value.

The subject of adult education interested me so I joined AONTAS as an individual member.

With their help, I have become an advocate for the wider benefits of adult learning. I have been involved in campaigns for the learner voice; funding for grants for part-time courses; and recognition of prior learning. There have been huge advancements in learner voice initiatives and learner representation locally, nationally and internationally. I am currently the adult learner representative on the board of QQI. This is the first time an adult learner representative has been appointed to a State board and it has been a huge learning opportunity.

### ***"We took the long and winding road or 'scenic route' back to education"***

For many adult learners, we did not have the chance to take the conventional route through education. We took the long and winding road or 'scenic route' back to education. But I am proof that it can be done! I have now completed a degree in All Hallows and graduated last December. I proved you don't need a super brain you just need the will and desire to do it. I finally obtained my 'deferred dream'.

## DON KERMAN

### Place of Learning

Tuam Adult Learning Centre, Galway & Roscommon Education & Training Board (GRETB), Co Galway

### Theme

Positive Learning Experience

*“Returning to education was the happiest day of my life”*

### *“I was away from learning for many years”*

Returning to education was a great experience for me. However, it was a huge step as I had been away from the learning environment for many years. One thing that spurred me on throughout this experience has been my self-belief and my willpower to continue learning. From the moment I began my learning journey, I made the decision to never look back and to only look forward. It has been a fantastic opportunity for me that I have grabbed with both hands. It has allowed me to gain a huge amount of knowledge and has had many positive benefits.

### *“When it came to learning, I worked very hard”*

I returned to education three years ago. I remember my first day so well; it was the 27<sup>th</sup> of November 2014. I got great support from my first tutor Mary and as a result I successfully received a QQI Level 2 component certificate in writing. I was so proud of myself and thankful for the support of my tutor. When it came to learning, I



worked very hard and I often studied through the night. I'm a full time carer so this suited me. I really enjoyed the process of learning new things but I found that I needed my own space to study properly.

***“The day I returned to education was the happiest day of my life”***

I can honestly say that the day I returned to education was the happiest day of my life. It was a proud day for me and my family. I attended Tuam Adult Learning Centre and they have given me the opportunity to prove that I can start fresh. Tuam is my home town and I am delighted that I can continue learning here. I now have a new tutor, and she is very supportive. The learning environment suits me perfectly and I am excited for what the future holds.



## LEARNING OUTCOMES

Returning to education is the key, not just to economic success but also to personal, social and cultural development and has a range of outcomes and benefits for the learner.

It is important to recognise that there are a range of outcomes, which should be equally valued and have an impact at both a personal and social level for adult learners.

For some learners the outcome is securing employment in their 'dream job', or an increased sense of wellbeing following a traumatic experience, for others it's having the confidence to help their children with their homework.

The following learner stories demonstrate a range of learning outcomes.

## JULIE-ANNE DALTON

Place of Learning  
Elevation Training Mountjoy, Dublin

Theme  
Learning Outcomes

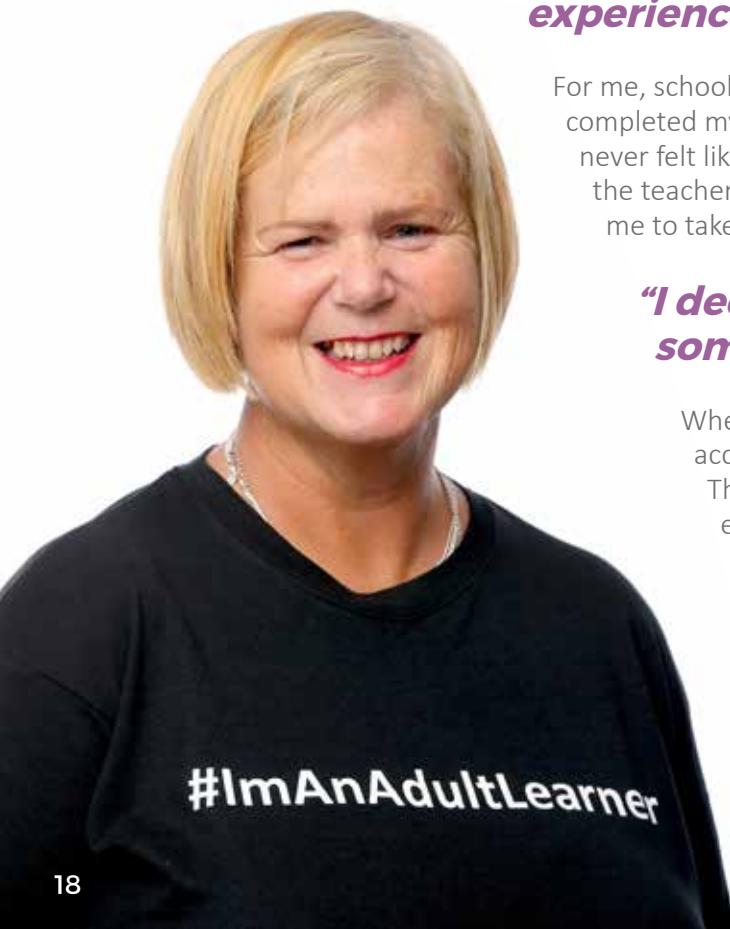
*“ I really feel like I am achieving something ”*

### *“For me school was not an enjoyable experience”*

For me, school was not an enjoyable experience. I stuck it out and completed my Leaving Certificate but no matter how hard I worked, I never felt like I achieved the results that I deserved. I always felt like the teachers were going at too fast a pace and it was difficult for me to take in the information.

### *“I decided that I needed to do something for myself”*

When I finally left school, I worked at various jobs doing accounts. I got married and gave up work to raise my sons. This was my full-time job and one that I found extremely enjoyable. Following a traumatic time in my life in which I lost my son, I decided that I needed to do something for myself. To be honest, I wasn't sure where to turn. I began helping a very close friend with the care of her disabled son and I realised how enjoyable and rewarding I found the experience. For the first time in a while, I felt like I had a purpose.



***“The course has equipped me with the knowledge and expertise to deal with a variety of situations”***

It was very daunting but with the encouragement of my family and friends, I decided to explore the possibility of returning to education so I could work in the healthcare sector. Following successful employment with a company called Comfort Keepers, they offered me an opportunity to complete my QQI Level 5 course in healthcare. So far the course has equipped me with the knowledge and expertise to deal with a variety of situations and this helps me in my day-to-day work. The course is also QQI accredited which is great as it provides me with the skills necessary for working in a healthcare role and I really feel like I am achieving something.

***“I am excited for what the future holds”***

I am enjoying my work as a carer and my hope for the future is to specialise in the area of palliative care. I would encourage anyone who is thinking of returning to education to do it. I have obtained distinctions in my first two modules, which I never thought would be possible. Finally, my hard work is paying off. Returning to work and education has been an amazing experience. I am now doing a job that I love and I am looking forward to the future.

## JOY-TENDAI KANGERE

Place of Learning  
University College Dublin (UCD), Dublin

Theme  
Learning Outcomes

*“Adult learners can use their skills, know-how and experience to excel in a learning environment”*

***“Returning to education when trying to balance family life with two small children initially seemed unattainable”***

I returned to education to study law, my lifelong passion. To me, it's like tackling Mount Everest and I have dubbed these four years my 'Edu- Everest'. I am currently studying a Bachelor of Civil Law Hons Degree in University College Dublin (UCD). Returning to education when trying to balance family life with two small children initially seemed unattainable but three years on, I'm still amazed at how I've managed. It has been a great experience and I would have regretted it had I not tried.

***“I felt like I had been given a second chance in life”***

I went through a difficult period in my life where I experienced the loss of my baby and nearly died. It took a long time to recover from this traumatic event and I had to leave my job.

Following this I felt like I had been given a second chance in life and I decided I wanted to use my voice for those who cannot speak out.



I choose law as it had been my career ambition since I was six years old. Most importantly, I am doing this for my son, who unfortunately did not live long enough to accomplish his own dreams.

***“Returning to education leads to self-discovery”***

I hope to graduate in 2018, which will be a big achievement! My goal is to establish a career in Corporate Finance but I also want to advocate for civic rights. The last three years have taught me to follow my dreams. Returning to education leads to self-discovery- you will discover things you never knew about yourself. You will learn to take the challenge and fulfil those goals that you were once afraid of.

***“I have life experiences behind me”***

Embarking on a new career path or retraining is a rewarding experience. It may seem daunting having to study with people that are younger than you.

As a person of ethnic minority I was also worried that I wouldn't fit in. But I always remember; I have life experiences behind me, I've managed to run a household and do my job. Adult learners can use their skills, know-how and experience to excel in a learning environment.

## EILEEN BENNETT

### Place of Learning

Galway Institute of Technology (GIT)/  
National University of Ireland (NUI),  
Co Galway

### Theme

Learning Outcomes

“*An advocate of  
lifelong learning*”

### *“I went straight into the world of work”*

I finished my Leaving Certificate at 17 and went straight into the world of work so I could help to contribute financially at home. I secured a job as a bank clerk – a much sought-after ‘permanent and pensionable’ position at the time. As a result, people thought I was mad when I left after nearly four years to volunteer with troubled teens in Manchester, England. I loved the volunteer work but I hated city life, so I returned home to Bray, Wicklow in the late 1970s and I began work in a veterinary practice. I decided to visit Connemara for a holiday in 1980, I fell in love with it and I’m still here to this day.

### *“I was hungry for knowledge”*

Raising my family took over and my passion to learn was put on the back burner. I always felt I missed out, and sometimes felt ‘less’ than other people who had continued with their education. I was hungry for knowledge and my love of horses led me back into education. I began teaching horse-riding part-time in my local riding school.



I felt the need to have a piece of paper to back up my experience and I completed a qualification as a Horse Sport Ireland coach.

### ***“Four of us joined together to set up our business Horses Connect”***

During this time, I was very fortunate to get the opportunity to train as a therapeutic riding instructor. I met some amazing people who were equally interested in horses and four of us joined together to set up our business Horses Connect. We saw that there was a need for more than therapeutic horse-riding, so we studied equine-assisted learning and two of us went on to become certified equine specialists. This meant we could offer clients a wide range of equine-facilitated activities. To compliment this work, I've also completed some non-accredited courses including mindfulness for professionals and project management. I found these courses very beneficial. They allow me to offer my clients the best possible experience by ensuring that I have the necessary knowledge.

### ***“I don't have any regrets about not continuing education sooner”***

Most of the education and training that I have done has been supported by organisations like Skillnets or Forum Connemara. It is worth doing some research into different financial supports when looking to return to education. I have gained a passion for learning and I relish every opportunity to develop my skills and knowledge. I have been recently toying with the idea of a PhD- that would be my absolute dream. Even at 61, I don't feel I've left it too late to reach that goal. I don't have any regrets about not continuing my education sooner. I doubt I would have appreciated it so much if I'd taken the traditional route.

## LISA NEVIN

### Place of Learning

Longford College of Further Education (LCFE), Co Longford

### Theme

Learning Outcomes

*“I can now pursue the career of my dreams”*

### ***“I demonstrated a high level of commitment and passion for the industry”***

I participated in Longford & Westmeath Education and Training Board’s Erasmus+ Programme last July, which included a valuable work placement in a 5-star spa hotel in Tenerife. My time there made me more committed to and passionate about a career in the travel industry. Working in another European country allowed me to gain the skills and competences to communicate effectively with people across international borders, which was a huge benefit of the experience. Once the programme was completed, I acquired a Europass Mobility - an official document issued by QQI - which recorded the experience that I had gained abroad.

### ***“I decided to seize the opportunity”***

I then successfully secured a job in London last August, which I was delighted with. With all the qualifications and experience behind me, I decided to seize the opportunity. I felt like the world was my oyster. I had something extra to offer the company when I went for the interview and this gave me confidence.



I had the experience of working with people from different nationalities and had gained cultural awareness.

***“I credit the brilliant staff in Longford College of Further Education”***

I would not have got to this point in my career if I hadn't participated in the Erasmus+ Programme. It has been a really life changing experience for me and I can now pursue the career of my dreams. Following the experience that I gained through my job in London, I have since been offered a job closer to home in a prestigious hotel in Galway. I credit the brilliant staff in Longford College of Further Education for their huge support and encouragement in getting me to this point.



# LEARNER SUPPORTS

Adult learners often lead busy lives and can be juggling family and work commitments as well as returning to education. Many people have been away from education for a considerable amount of time and may require flexibility and additional supports to help them succeed. It is essential that learners have the opportunity to engage in courses that are appropriate for them and suited to their skills, talents and aspirations.

Often learners may be unsure of what path to take or where their interests lie so it is important that they receive quality guidance and information. Learners benefit from a holistic guidance process that enables them to make an informed decision about the kinds of courses available to them.

A lot of adult learners will face challenges at some stage of their learning and without adequate support problems can feel much bigger than they actually are. A range of supports including finance and childcare can greatly assist learners to access courses, successfully complete them and progress on to further education or employment.

The following learner stories demonstrate the importance of learner supports.

## CAROL DUNNE

Place of Learning  
Ballyfermot College of Further Education,  
Dublin

Theme  
Learner Supports

*“It’s brilliant to see my granddaughter and I start this journey together”*

***“As the eldest of 11 children none of us went to college”***

A bad accident forced me to leave school early at 14 and the road to recovery was long. As the eldest of 11 children none of us went to college, being from such a big family it just wasn’t an option for us. After leaving school my focus turned to family and working life; I reared four children and spent my time volunteering in my community.

***“I know that I’m good at what I do but like many others I lack the qualifications to back this up”***

I’ve learnt so much through volunteering over the last 15 years and it has opened my eyes to local issues. When I was bringing up my children there were very few family support groups and crèches were just too expensive. This was a real issue for families then and it still is now. I know what it’s like not to have support so being able to offer this to members of my community is really rewarding for me.



I've developed a passion for helping others and I now want to establish a career from this. I know I'm good at what I do but I lack the qualifications to back this up.

***“My initial response was that I was too old”***

A friend recently suggested that I return to education so I could progress my career. My initial response was that I was too old. I was unaware about the options available and I always thought college would cost a fortune. Then when my granddaughter was in 6th year I realised that we didn't have adequate information on colleges and grants. Her school advised me to contact the Parents Mentoring Committee, where I received useful information about different education options, like the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS). I was surprised to learn about the variety of different routes into education and I shared this knowledge with my grandchildren.

***“My granddaughter and I have enrolled in Ballyfermot College of Further Education together”***

My granddaughter and I have enrolled in Ballyfermot College of Further Education together which has been a really unique experience. I have just started a VTOS QQI Level 5 course in health and community and I hope this will provide me with the qualification I need to get a job in the community and voluntary sector. I found returning to education daunting at first but when I realised there were other adult learners in my class and younger students didn't bat their eyes about my age, I could relax and start to enjoy myself. It's brilliant to see my granddaughter and I start this journey together and I am very proud of her. Most importantly I am doing this for me because I want to get the recognition I deserve after 15 years of volunteering in my community.

## BARRY CHRISTY

### Place of Learning

Galway Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT),  
Co Galway

### Theme

Learner Supports

“

*Accessing the available services helped me to return to education*”

”

***“I believed I would never be ‘book’ smart and I had resigned any hope of trying to be”***

I hated my experience of education the first time around and I remember it as some of the worst years of my life. I quickly fell behind in primary school due to learning difficulties, which made the whole experience very stressful for me. I often felt stupid, slow and helpless. By secondary school, I had accepted my limitations. On reflection, this makes me furious. I believed I would never be ‘book’ smart and I had resigned any hope of trying to be. After completing my Leaving Certificate in 2005, I began working in one of the local factories. While working, I developed hobbies and found myself reading lots of books related to my interests. Learning about areas which I had a passion for, was the key to overcoming my negative relationship with formal education.

***“I was faced with the possibility of losing my job due to a lack of qualifications”***

When the recession began, I was faced with the possibility of losing my job due to a lack of qualifications so I decided it was time to go



back to education. I met with an Adult Guidance Counsellor in Cavan & Monaghan Education and Training Board (CMETB) and together we discovered the best course which catered for my needs and interests. I also received help with the application process for grants and college. The whole college process was completely alien to me and quite daunting to say the least. With help, I successfully applied for a course I was truly passionate about in Galway Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT).

***“I’ve learned so much from returning to education”***

I graduated from GMIT in 2015 with an honours degree and was immediately hired by a large car company. After a few months, I was offered a job which was more in line with my interests and I was later promoted. I have a new-found interest in education and I may pursue a Masters or Doctorate down the line. I’ve learned so much from returning to education.

It is a different experience from primary or secondary school as you are doing a subject of your own choice, which makes it far easier to learn because you have greater interest and subjects are taught in many different ways.

There will never seem to be a good time to go back to education particularly if you had a bad experience of education first time around. However, there are loads of helpful services available to you including guidance, funding, assisted learning and counselling so don’t be afraid to avail of them.

## GERALDINE LYNCH

### Place of Learning

Sligo Adult Education Centre, Mayo, Sligo & Leitrim Education and Training Board (MSLETB), Co Sligo

### Theme

Learner Supports

“

*Returning to education was my lifeline to getting back out there*”

”

### ***“I lost my confidence and was not able to return to work”***

Back in 2004, I was a self-employed montessori teacher with my own crèche and I ran a second hand book shop. I was enjoying working for myself and rearing my family but out of the blue I was struck down with a brain haemorrhage. This resulted in loss of hearing and affected my short-term memory. It took me many years to come to terms with what happened to me and the haemorrhage impacted both my physical and mental health. As a result, I lost my confidence and was not able to return to work. After a few years of trying to recover and to get back to normality, I heard about Mayo, Sligo & Leitrim Education and Training Board (MSLETB) and I decided to visit my local adult education centre in Sligo. I received great advice and signed up to go back and study on a part-time basis to ease myself into learning.

***“It really has been a lifeline to me getting back out there again”***

I completed a Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) course and I loved every minute of it.



My tutor was so patient and helpful to every individual in the class. He gave us one-to-one support and made sure we were all able to keep up with the workload. He was very understanding of my health issues and always went the extra mile to help me with my work. My tutor and classmates made my experience so enjoyable. The centre has a fantastic level of tutor and peer support and it has been my lifeline to getting back out there again. In the future, I hope to do a music course. I am currently learning an instrument and music has proven very effective for my recovery and improving my memory. Since entering the Sligo Adult Education Centre, I have made new friends in my class and I have joined a gardening group.

Returning to education has given me my confidence back and I now have so much more self-esteem. I feel like myself again and I look forward to what the future holds for me as an adult learner.

## TONY HUGHES

Place of Learning  
Mohill Enterprise Centre, Co Leitrim

Theme  
Learner Supports

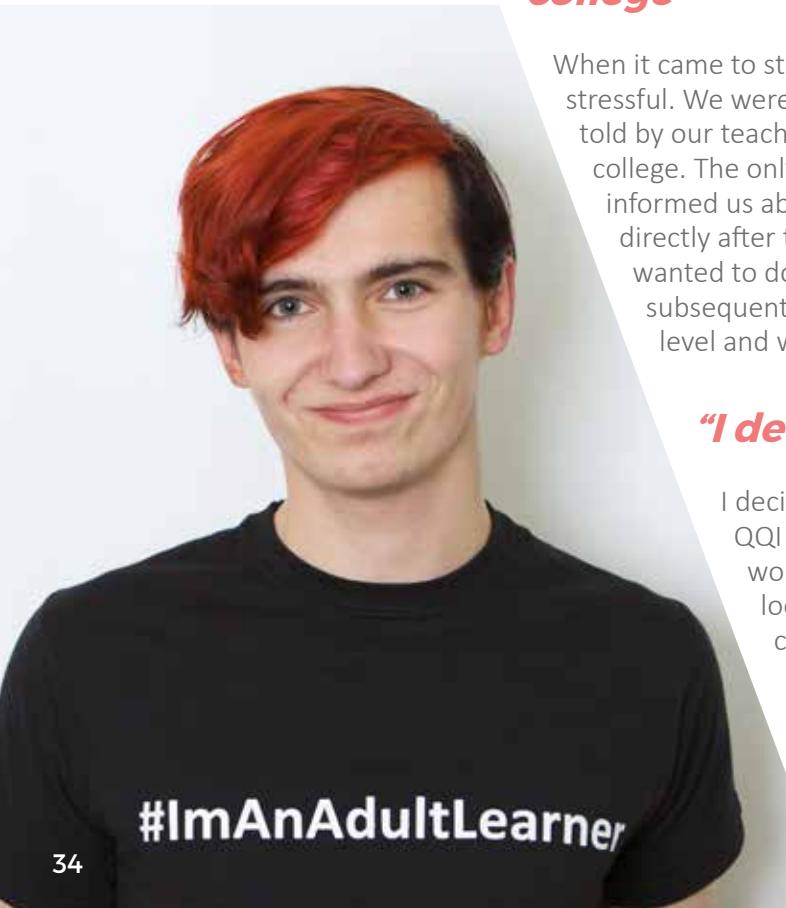
“*Why I chose the further education route*”

***“I had no idea what I wanted to do in college”***

When it came to studying for my Leaving Certificate I found it very stressful. We were studying multiple subjects every day and we were told by our teachers that we needed to do very well to progress to college. The only option that the guidance councillors in school informed us about was progressing to third level institutions directly after the Leaving Certificate. I had no idea what I wanted to do in college so rather than rush my decision and subsequently drop out of a course, I opted not to go to third level and wait for a year or so.

***“I decided to take a chance”***

I decided to return to education after hearing about a QQI Level 5 course in computer applications for the workplace in Mohill Enterprise Centre, through my local INTREO service in Carrick-on-Shannon. I took a chance and enrolled in the course. I was extremely happy that I did. The tutors and staff were very caring and helpful. I bonded with the rest of the group on the course and I learned a variety of both practical and personal skills.



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***“The internship is giving me great practical experience”***

I graduated my QQI Level 5 course with an overall distinction, which I was delighted with. My plan was to progress to college and study IT, but Mohill Enterprise Centre offered me the chance to apply for a nine-month internship in the centre. I applied for the internship and was successful. The internship is IT based and I do a certain amount of tutoring with students attending the centre. I also have one-to-one meetings with customers of the centre who are looking for specific computing or IT solutions, such as repairs or assistance with computers or devices. The internship is giving me great practical experience of working in an IT environment.

***“Consider your options and explore what your interests are”***

Although I have postponed my plan of going to third level so I can complete my internship, I hope

to attend college in a few years' time as a mature applicant. Now I have time to decide exactly what strand of IT I would like to go into. I think it's important not to just follow the crowd. Consider your options and explore what your interests are.

I would also recommend that you see what your local area has to offer in terms of courses and information. In my case, Mohill Enterprise Centre is within a few kilometres of my home and I have benefitted greatly from having a computer training centre nearby and not having to travel a long distance.

# MAJELLA LYNCH

## Place of Learning

Cavan & Monaghan Education and Training Board (ETB) Adult Education Services, Co Cavan

## Theme

Learner Supports

“

*I am proud of myself and you will be too*

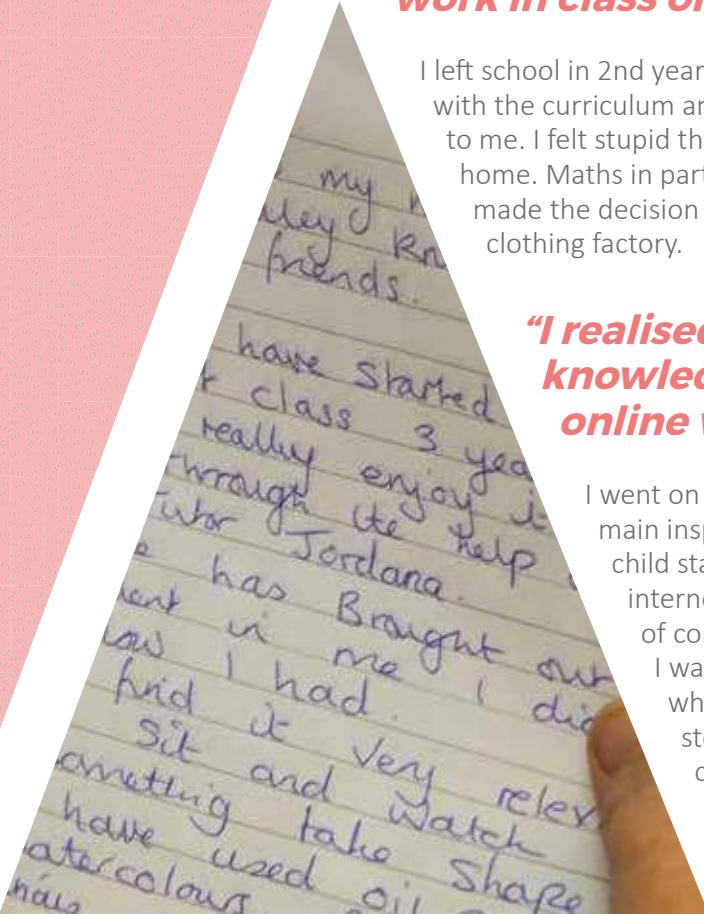
”

## ***“I felt stupid that I couldn’t manage the work in class or at home”***

I left school in 2nd year with no formal qualifications. I was struggling with the curriculum and there was no additional support available to me. I felt stupid that I couldn’t manage the work in class or at home. Maths in particular was a problem for me. As a result, I made the decision to leave school early and I started working in a clothing factory.

## ***“I realised that I didn’t have any knowledge of computers or the online world”***

I went on to have two children and they became my main inspiration for returning to education. My eldest child started to use computers and had access to the internet. I realised that I didn’t have any knowledge of computers or the online world and as a parent, I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to monitor what my children were accessing online. My first step was to enrol with my friend on a beginner’s computer class. I was very nervous about returning to a classroom and was anxious



about feeling stupid compared to other people. By the end of the first class, I realised I had no reason to be nervous. My tutor made me feel at ease and encouraged and motivated me to continue furthering my education.

***“Only for the support of my tutor I would have walked away”***

At the end of the computer course I enrolled on a QQI Level 3 course in communication and personal effectiveness and went on to complete the full award which was the equivalent to my Junior Certificate. This was my first ever qualification. As part of the course, I needed to complete a maths module which was a subject area that I dreaded. I often cried trying to understand the course work and only for the support of my tutor I would have walked away. Due to the fantastic support I received, I continued with my studies and achieved

a QQI Level 4 course in general learning. I then decided to complete a QQI Level 5 course in health service skills which led to employment as a carer - a job I absolutely love.

***“I was lucky to receive a great level of support from my husband and children”***

I would like to continue learning and hope to find employment in one of the local nursing homes or in the local hospital. I feel passionate about being a carer and it makes me very happy. I was lucky to receive a great level of support from my husband and children and they encouraged me to continue even when I felt I couldn't do it anymore. To anyone who is thinking about returning to education, I would say make that call and take the first step to gaining your qualifications. It is the best thing you will ever do.

## NOELEEN WATSON

### Place of Learning

Roslyn Park College, National Learning Network (NLN), Dublin/ Bray Institute of Further Education, Co Wicklow

### Theme

Learner Supports

“

*It takes just one step and if you're willing to take that step people will be there to help you*”

”

***“Sometimes our plans don't always work out the way we want them to”***

In 1990 I completed my Leaving Certificate. I went on to Business College and completed a certificate in business studies. My dream was to become a successful business woman. As we all know, sometimes our plans don't always work out the way we want them to. I became pregnant in 1993 and stayed at home to care for my daughter. I had three more children after that and then I felt a bit stuck in my life.

***“From that moment on my life changed for the better”***

After the birth of my last child I suffered from depression. I hid it pretty well, I always had a smile and a positive word while inside I was dying. I had an accident in Christmas 2009 which left me in a lot of pain. It was a very difficult time in my life but I found help from an amazing counsellor and from that moment on my life changed for the better. The Home School Community Liaison Coordinator



suggested I attend a course to help with my confidence. The facilitator was brilliant, helping and supporting me. My confidence grew slowly during the course. I also began a Pain Management course where I learned everything from Yoga to Mindfulness. I then heard about a graphic design course in Roslyn Park College in Sandymount. I couldn't believe my luck, the idea of this course made my soul sing. I went for the interview and trial day and the tutor told me I had an eye for design. I applied for the course and was accepted.

### ***"I have had a few busy years learning all I can learn"***

I have had a few busy years learning all I can learn and this has helped build my confidence. I finished at the National Learning Centre in 2013 and passed all my exams with distinctions. I also completed 3 years of Partners of Education. With the help of an Adult Guidance Counsellor, I decided to apply to Bray Institute of Further Education for a course in graphic design. It was tough and a lot of hard work but in 2015 I received my QQI Level 6 in Graphic Design with distinctions. I have done many

projects for various clients and I have received great feedback on all the work I have done and look forward to where this will bring me.

### ***"I could stand there with my head held high and tell my story"***

I have been asked a number of times to speak about my experience of returning to education, I spoke in front of 70 Home School Community Liaison Coordinators and I never imagined I could stand there with my head held high and tell my story. A couple of weeks later I was asked by AONTAS to speak about my journey back into education and was featured on the One Step Up ([www.onestepup.ie](http://www.onestepup.ie)) website. Again this was a huge personal achievement and my hope now is that my story might inspire people to return to education. I have been so blessed and lucky that the right people came into my life and supported me. It takes just one step and if you're willing to make that step people will be there to help you.



# PROGRESSION

The following learner stories highlight the importance of progression in adult learning.

It is important that learning opportunities offer people the means to engage in further education, training and/or employment at a pace dictated by their needs, abilities and circumstances.

Often learners may need to ease themselves into the learning environment before they feel ready to make a decision about what path to take.

Taster courses and modular accredited programmes whereby a learner can build up to a full QQI award over time, taking into account the commitments of adult learners (eg family obligations and childcare needs), can be hugely beneficial.

## SHARON CONLON

### Place of Learning

Warrenmount Community Education Centre, Liberties College of Further Education/Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Dublin

### Theme

Progression

*“Community education gave me the confidence to progress to third level”*

***“It was important for me to engage with learning not just for academic purposes”***

This journey began for me when I attended Warrenmount Community Education Centre in Dublin in January 2009. I had known of the centre for many years and decided to find out more information. The staff were so encouraging and could see that it was important for me to engage with learning not just for academic purposes but also to help me build up self-esteem. Faced with rejection after rejection in the job market, I had lost confidence.

***“The tutors were supportive and encouraging and I really enjoyed coming to the centre for classes”***

I had always been interested in working with children and I enrolled on three QQI Level 5 modules in childcare. The tutors were supportive and encouraging and I really enjoyed coming to the centre for classes. The centre is a unique place. It's not just a place of learning, it's also a place that focuses on the wellbeing of all of their learners.



Through my experience I realised that I could progress on to a QQI Level 5 Major award and a QQI Level 6 course in supervision in childcare. I applied to Liberties College of Further Education in Dublin and was accepted on a two-year programme.

***“I applied for a place on the degree programme”***

I then set my sights on a NFQ Level 8 Bachelor of Arts Honours in Early Childhood Education. I felt that this qualification would enable me to progress my career. I applied for a place on the degree programme in Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and I was delighted to be offered advanced entry to year two. I was very nervous but got great support from my previous tutors.

***“My thirst for knowledge hasn't diminished”***

I was awarded a First Class Honours and my graduation was a wonderful experience for me. I am always aware that this achievement began when I attended Warrenmount. It was here that I gained the confidence and the encouragement which helped me to believe that I could achieve my goals. My thirst for knowledge hasn't diminished and I hope to continue to a master's degree programme in 2016 where I will study to be an adult educator as I would like to support and encourage others on their learning journey.

## JOHN CONNELL

Place of Learning  
Ballyfermot and Chapelizod Partnership  
(Obair), Dublin

Theme  
Progression

“*I have gained qualifications but also important life skills*”

***“The expectation from parents and other family members was to go out and get a job”***

My experience of education first time around was not positive. Despite this, I did ok in my studies and I received good grades in my Leaving Certificate in 1993. At that time, there were few people progressing to further education and the expectation from parents and other family members was to ‘go out and get a job’ so that’s what I did. I entered the world of work straight from school and continued to work for the same company until I was made redundant in November 2011.

The company I worked for provided no advice on what options might be available and this was extremely difficult. I had been working there since before I even left school and I had no idea what to do next. I decided I needed a change so I visited my local Community Partnership.



#ImAnAdultLearner

***“I can honestly say it has been the best decision I have made so far”***

I visited the Ballyfermot and Chapelizod Partnership (Obair) to get some information on suitable options. I received useful advice from the wonderful staff there and I was given the encouragement I needed to return to education. I can honestly say it has been the best decision I have made so far. I started with a one year Return to Learning (RTL) course which was challenging but it gave me a taste for learning and I was eager to progress. I completed my RTL course and moved to a QQI Level 5 course in social care, before progressing to a Higher Diploma in applied social studies/social & community care. Despite it being a tough course and suffering a heart attack during my studies, I managed to pass with flying colours in May 2016. I am hopeful that I will find work in this area soon.

***“When I returned to education I could not even type or send an email”***

To anyone thinking of returning to education, all I can say is go for it. When I began my journey back to learning I couldn't even type or send an email but after receiving great encouragement, my eyes have been opened. I have gained great qualifications but also acquired important life skills such as sticking to deadlines, broadening my mind and way of thinking and developing friendships. It's been a great experience with many benefits. Age is no barrier, just believe in yourself, listen to advice and most importantly don't be afraid of change.

# ROWENA WATTERS

## Place of Learning

City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETb) /SAOL Project/Liberties College/All Hallows College, Dublin

## Theme

Progression

“

*The level of support and range of programmes was just what I needed*”

”

## ***“I didn't feel ready to continue with my education”***

I completed my Leaving Certificate in 2004 but at the time I found the whole experience extremely stressful. I didn't feel ready to continue with my education so I decided to work for a few years. Eventually I had to take a break from work due to mental health issues. I made the decision to return to education as I felt it would boost my confidence and improve my mental health. I did one module a week on the QQI Level 5 Minor award in human growth and development with the City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETb). This course acted as a stepping stone back into education.

## ***“I enjoyed being in a class with other adult learners who I could relate to”***

Following my positive experience, I was inspired to continue with my education and I applied for a full-time QQI Level 5 course in community and health in the Liberties College. I made lots of



friends on this course and I enjoyed being in a class with other adult learners who I could relate to. My success on the course encouraged me to progress and complete a Bachelor of Arts Honours Degree in Humanities in All Hallows College (DCU). I am very proud to have finished this degree, especially as I lost my dad suddenly in second year and I found this very difficult. The staff in the college were extremely supportive and helped me get through it.

***“I really enjoyed learning in this environment”***

After college, I moved to a new area and my friend told me about some of the local supports such as the SAOL project, a community project focused on improving the lives of women affected by poverty and addiction. I began Peer to Peer Training in the areas of mental health and Hepatitis C. I enjoyed learning in this environment as the SAOL project provided great support for people with mental health difficulties. The level of support and range of programmes was just what I needed.

I've learned so much through these programmes and I have been able to integrate with my new community.

***“I met so many different people and it opened my mind and gave me great insight”***

I hope to find employment soon in a job I love and I would like to continue my education in the future by doing a master's degree in psychology. There are so many possibilities ahead. Returning to education is extremely worthwhile; I learned so much about myself and the world. I met so many different people and it opened my mind and gave me great insight. It also increased my confidence and allowed me to make new friends. It may feel that life gets in the way but education is an outlet which does so much for you and your growth.

## RODGER SWEENEY

### Place of Learning

Munster HR Associates, Thurles,  
Co Tipperary

### Theme

Progression

“*Work wanted a qualification and so did I*”

### ***“I felt that I didn’t need an education”***

I never liked school and I felt that I didn’t need an education because back in the 1970s jobs were plentiful and you had no problem gaining employment. So, I left school at the age of 16 with four passes in my Inter Certificate (now known as the Junior Certificate) and walked straight into a job.

### ***“Employers began to look for qualifications”***

As time went on the job market became very uncertain. Although I had a lot of work experience, I had no certificate or education behind me. Employers began to look for qualifications and proof of knowledge and experience of the job you were seeking. I decided to return to education and gain the qualifications that I needed.

### ***“I successfully achieved a distinction”***

Through a Community Employment scheme, I worked for six years and later I went on to study a QQI Level 6 award in supervisory



management skills in Munster HR Associates (MHRA). Doing this course boosted my self-confidence and gave me a feeling of self-worth. I successfully achieved a distinction despite being out of education for such a long time.

***“The support I received from my peers and tutors helped me through”***

It was challenging at times when I thought I couldn't do it. Sometimes, I doubted my ability but I got great encouragement from fellow students and my tutor gave me the advice and information that I needed. The support I received from my peers and tutors helped me through my course and I received a distinction in supervisory management skills at 58 years of age which I was very proud of.

***“There is lots of advice and information available”***

I look forward to progressing and in the future I hope to gain full-time employment as I now have the knowledge, skills and work experience in management. Returning to education can be daunting but if you are thinking of going back talk to people that have completed a similar course. There is lots of advice and information available, you just need to ask.

## KATHLEEN DOWD

### Place of Learning

Longford & Westmeath Education and Training Board (LWETB)/Longford Women's Link, Co Longford/An Cosán Virtual Community College (VCC)

### Theme

Progression

“*Take it  
one day at a time*”

### ***“My children were young then and I had to think of their future and mine”***

I always enjoyed education but because of financial barriers I didn't get the opportunity to continue to third level. I began working in a meat factory and found the work quite monotonous and very physically demanding. Then the factory closed down and I was made redundant. My children were young when it happened and I had to think of their future and mine, so I decided to return to education.

### ***“My hope is to complete this course”***

I decided to return to education and completed a QQI Level 5 course in business studies in Longford & Westmeath Education and Training Board (LWETB), I then progressed on to Longford Women's Link (LWL) – a community education provider. I have since successfully completed a diploma in Women's Studies from UCD through an outreach programme run in LWL. I am continuing my education with LWL and I am now doing a NFQ Level 7 course through An Cosán's Virtual Community College

– an online e-learning platform. I hope to complete this course and participate in further training opportunities as I love to learn.

### ***“Take it one day at a time”***

I am now a Community Employment Supervisor in LWL, where I work with adults returning to education every day. For many, returning to education is a step into a new world and this can bring a sense of curiosity or fear of the unknown. I tell the learners to take it one day at a time. I feel when adults who return to education take this approach, their worries disappear and they begin to enjoy the journey more. I know this advice works as it got me to where I am today.

## KENNETH WHITE

### Place of Learning

Cork Education and Training Board (CETB)  
/Respond! Co Cork

### Theme

Progression

“

*I want to say to anyone with literacy problems, just take that step: education is everything*”

”

### ***“I had basic literacy skills, but my confidence was poor”***

In the classroom, I never paid attention and I got left behind. Everything went too quickly for me and no-one explained anything to me. I was young and naïve and I just wanted to be out in the world working. I got a job. There was 11 in the family and any money I earned I handed up to my mam at home. I didn't have problems at home or anything like that. We got on great as a family. My brother got me a job after school, and throughout my 20s and early 30s, I worked in various manual jobs on building sites and as a kitchen porter. I had basic literacy skills, but my confidence was poor and it affected my employment prospects.

### ***“I was unemployed for a total of nearly five years”***

Then, the hard times hit and work became scarce. I was unemployed for nearly five years. I decided that I needed to do something to improve my chances of employment. I took the daunting step of approaching an Adult Literacy Scheme in Churchfield, Cork. It was a big step to be



taking in my life, as an adult, but they were very welcoming and made me feel at home.

***“I got my diploma and the graduation was the proudest moment of my life”***

Eventually, I got a job through the Community Employment scheme as a caretaker but at the end of the scheme, I was worried for the future. I then heard about Respond! College, which offers a range of programmes and professional training courses accredited by QQI. Since that day, I've never looked back. I got my diploma and the graduation was the proudest moment of my life. I kept thinking about all the people who helped me along the way. Without them none of this would have been possible. My confidence and self-esteem has grown.

***“I love the job and I'm passionate about it”***

Halfway through my course, I applied for and got a job with a company that provides caregivers for elderly people in their homes. I love the job and I'm passionate about it. Helping people less fortunate than myself makes me feel like I'm doing some good in my life. None of us ever knows when we're going to need help. This has opened a whole new world for me and shown me how vulnerable people are and how dependent on help we can all be.

*Kenneth's story was originally written by Ellie O'Byrne and published in the Evening Echo on 15th July 2016.*

## DENIS O'BRIEN

### Place of Learning

Cork Institute of Technology/University  
College Cork (UCC), Co Cork

### Theme

Progression

“*It's never too late*”

### ***“I wanted to keep my brain occupied”***

I returned to education because I had been out of work for several years due to injury and illness. When I started to feel better I decided to do something with my time. I wanted to keep my brain occupied and felt that I was too young to retire.

### ***“This sector became redundant after the economic crash”***

I received a Higher Certificate in Construction Studies from Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) in the early 2000's, but this sector became redundant after the economic crash so I changed track and started doing IT related training courses, such as Java Associate & Java Programmer.

Following on from this, I decided to do a full-time degree programme. Just a few years earlier, I would never have dreamed of doing this. I am now studying a BSc in Computer Science in University College Cork (UCC).



## ***“I would love to gain paid employment”***

I had to take a short break due to bad health but I have now returned to my 2nd year in UCC. I hope to finish my degree and I would love to gain paid employment or even self-employment after university.

## ***“Returning to education can be overwhelming”***

Returning to education can be overwhelming and very frustrating at times especially if you have limited means and resources, but it's also exciting and rewarding. The sense of accomplishment when you hold your first certificate or when you gain acceptance to a third level institution is heart-warming and mind blowing at the same time. Returning to education can be challenging but if anyone was thinking about it, I would say do it! It's never too late and the sooner you get started the better.



## **SOCIAL INCLUSION**

Adult learners benefit from a wide range of outcomes when they decide to return to learning, for some it can allow them to effectively engage and communicate with their local community, thereby supporting social inclusion.

Learners have outlined the value of both accredited and non-accredited courses in a range of education settings, from Education and Training Boards (ETBs) to higher education to community education.

These learning environments cater to the needs of the learner and play an important role in this learning outcome.

The following learner stories demonstrate the importance of social inclusion.

# IMANI TUTU

## Place of Learning

Cavan Adult Education Centre, Cavan & Monaghan Education and Training Board (CMETB), Co Cavan

## Theme

Social Inclusion

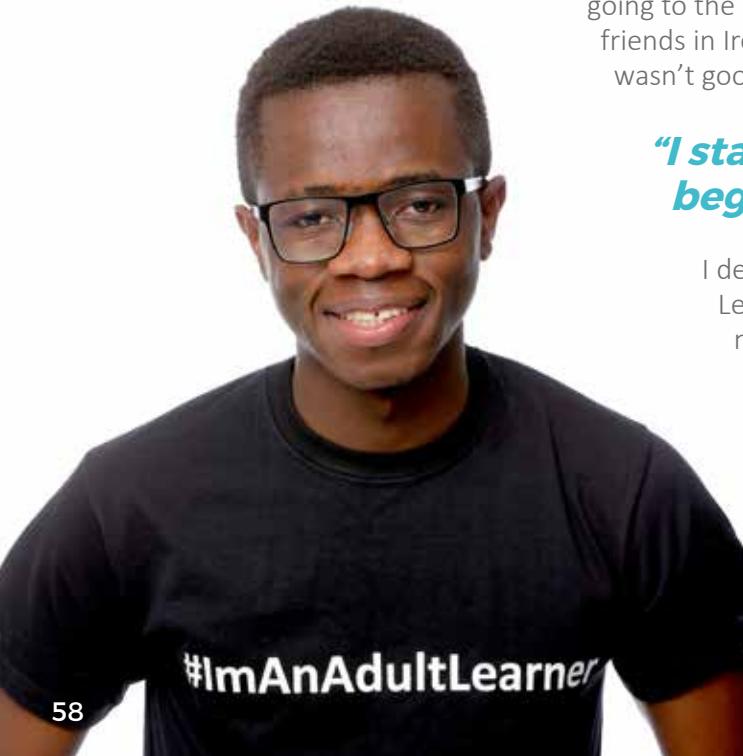
“*I couldn't speak a word of English*”

### ***“I couldn't speak a word of English”***

I am from the Republic Democratic of Congo and the spoken languages in my country are French and Swahili. When I came to Ireland two years ago, I couldn't speak a word of English. This made life very difficult for me because I couldn't complete essential tasks such as going to the doctor or making an appointment on my own. I had no friends in Ireland and I couldn't attend college because my English wasn't good enough.

### ***“I started learning English as a beginner”***

I decided to do English classes in the Cavan Adult Learning Centre (CALC). Learning a new language was not easy and I put a lot of effort into it. I had a great tutor who gave me a lot of support and I will not forget him. I started learning English as a beginner (QQI Level 2), then I progressed to a QQI Level 3 course. To further improve my English, I decided to take some other modules such as IT, cookery classes, communications and maths. I am currently doing a QQI Level 4 Major award and I hope to complete this shortly.



## ***“Learning English has given me confidence”***

I have benefited a lot from learning English. I no longer need an interpreter to express my feelings and I can now give my own opinion or converse in English with a group of people. Learning English has given me the confidence to talk in front of people without feeling sorry for myself. I can also make my own appointments. I have made new friends and I really enjoy our conversations.

## ***“Now I can go to college and progress my career”***

Learning English has meant a lot to me because now I can go to college to progress my career. I have applied for a QQI Level 5 course IT in Cavan Institute and I hope to start the course in September.

## ANNETTE MURPHY

Place of Learning  
University of Limerick, Co Limerick

Theme  
Social Inclusion

“

*My love of exploring new languages has introduced me to the culture and music of others*”

”

*Annette's story was shared to coincide with International Day of Languages on the 26th September 2016.*

### ***“His passion and love of culture and languages had a big impact on my own interests”***

From a young age, I gained knowledge of a variety of languages from my adoptive father. He studied languages for the Inter Cert and visited many European countries in his youth including Spain, France and Greece. His passion and love of culture and languages had a big impact on my own interests.

### ***“To date, I have gained knowledge, studied or attempted nearly 20 different languages”***

During my school years, I was fortunate to learn some Dutch, but my main area of study focused on French and German.



To date, I have gained knowledge, studied or attempted nearly 20 different languages including French, German, Irish, Greek, Italian, Portuguese and Russian. My knowledge of these languages varies from basic to intermediate but no matter what my level of ability is, I have still enjoyed the learning process. Learning languages has benefited me in many ways; it has helped me with my essay writing skills and introduced me to the culture and music of others. I enjoy discovering new cultural traditions and listening to the vast range of music from around the world.

***“I think the important thing with learning a new language is to focus on one language at a time”***

I think the important thing with learning a new language is to focus on one language at a time. One of the biggest mistakes I made was attempting too many new languages at once. Also, if you have the opportunity, I would highly recommend visiting a country where your chosen language is spoken

regularly – somewhere where they won't speak English to you. This will encourage you to learn and speak like a local.

## JOAN CLARKE

### Place of Learning

Galway & Roscommon Education and Training Board (GRETB), Co Galway

### Theme

Social Inclusion

“*All the learners in my group were deaf and I really enjoyed the course*”

Joan shared her story at the first National Adult Learner Forum that took place in Dublin in February 2016.

***“I wasn’t allowed use sign language as this was considered ‘bad’ language at the time”***

I am an adult learner and I am deaf. When I first attended school, I was taught through ‘oralism’ or speech and lip reading. I wasn’t allowed use sign language as this was considered ‘bad’ language at the time. I soon fell behind in school because I was struggling to follow the teachers through lip reading. I failed my Inter Certificate and left school early without doing the Leaving Certificate.

***“I thought I would fail at college, just like I had failed at school”***

I was too scared to go to college because I thought I would fail, just like I had failed at school. Some colleges supply interpreters for deaf students but that doesn’t happen all the time because of lack of funding.

***“All the learners in my group were deaf and I really enjoyed the course”***

I went to college at Galway & Roscommon Education and Training Board (GRETB) through a community education course that supplied interpreters for deaf learners. All the learners in my group were deaf and some of the group found travelling to and from the training centre difficult due to communicating on public transport. I really enjoyed the course and I am currently a peer mentor on a project in GRETB and I am also involved in the deaf community in Galway. I have taught sign language to members of staff at GRETB and I am setting up a support group for older deaf people in my community.

# CONCLUSION

AONTAS is passionate about promoting the learner voice and we believe that sharing inspiring learner stories best demonstrates how adult learning can transform the lives of individuals, families and communities.

As part of this work AONTAS launched a promotional campaign entitled **#ImAnAdultLearner** in 2016. The aim of the campaign was to share inspiring learner stories to encourage others to return to education, whilst highlighting the wider benefits of education. Every Monday AONTAS has shared learner stories using the hashtag **#MondayMotivation** on our social media platforms and through the AONTAS website on [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com). This campaign started with a simple survey which provided a space for learners to share their story in their own words. After the first stories were shared online, we started to see an increase in the number of stories we received and the momentum grew from there. To date our campaign has reached over 85,000 people through social media. Each story is unique and inspiring but together they show the different paths that people take when returning to learning.

We are committed to continuing with our campaign. The more stories we share, the louder the learner voice becomes. We would encourage adult learners to share their stories across various platforms so every person across Ireland can hear about the benefits and transformative power of adult learning. If you are interested in following in the footsteps of the learners featured in this book you can do so through the following:

## Share Your Learner Story

You can share your learner story through our online survey at:

[www.surveymonkey.com/r/LearnerStory](http://www.surveymonkey.com/r/LearnerStory)

### Or

Get in touch with our Learner Supports Officer, Karen Williams

Email: [kwilliams@aontas.com](mailto:kwilliams@aontas.com) or

Phone: 01 406 8220

## Information

For a free information booklet on what education and training options are on offer please download a free copy from the AONTAS website [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com) or Freephone 1800 303 669 for a hard copy book.

## **AONTAS Learner Engagement**

AONTAS engages with adult learners to ensure that their voice is heard at local, national and European level to help develop and improve adult learning services and policies. There are many ways for learners to get involved with the work of AONTAS such as:

- Share your learner story
- Represent Further Education and Training (FET) learners across Ireland to influence national FET policy at the National Adult Learner Forum
- Represent adult learners at European level
- Participate on learner advisory and focus groups
- Media and public speaking opportunities

For more information contact Karen Williams, Learner Supports Officer at:

[kwilliams@aontas.com](mailto:kwilliams@aontas.com).







### Contact Us

AONTAS

The National Adult Learning Organisation  
2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street,  
Ranelagh, Dublin 6

**Tel:** 01 406 8220

**Email:** [mail@aontas.com](mailto:mail@aontas.com)

**Website:** [www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com)

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