

# ***You too Can Succeed***

## ***INTRODUCTION***

This booklet is the factual story of a very determined young man, who has a disability and his journey and development through primary, secondary, and THIRD level education to full time employment.

It is written by that young man in his own words and prompted by his desire to help other young people with disabilities to understand more of what can be achieved.

It is an honour for me to be able to tell my story in this booklet, my name is Mark Ahern I am 25 years old, and I have a Degree in Commerce and a Masters in European Economics a Public Affairs.

To date I have had 2 jobs one in Mullingar Arts Centre and I am currently employed in Westmeath County Council as a clerical Officer.

I am going to start by talking about my experience in the education system, as a disabled person. This is because of the crucial role that I believe it played in helping me get a good job.

I like everyone else started off in primary school My parents wisely decided to build a house close to the primary school they wanted me to attend. It was called Saint Coleman's National School in Mullingar, Co. Westmeath.

It was the ideal place to start, as it was fully wheelchair accessible. In the future, I wouldn't always be so fortunate. The teachers were nice and I enjoyed my time there.

When I was 13, I started in the Christian Brothers School, College Street, Mullingar.

I still remember how excited I was when I started there. The school was not fully wheelchair accessible and I was to miss a few hours of classes every week as a result It was often about 4 or 5 hours per week that I couldn't attend.

At this time it didn't bother me that much because it gave me the opportunity to do my homework before I went home. However, my academic performance did suffer and I had to try and catch up myself.

In French I did get grinds after school. However, in a way this experience had a positive affect.

I had to be self-motivated and began to rely more on myself to solve problems and learn.

In physics there were times when the only person who was going to explain experiments to me was myself. This ability to self-motivate and self-learn was to be beneficial when I came up against other barriers in the future, I enjoyed my time in secondary school and it prepared me for my Leaving Certificate.

For my Leaving Certificate examination I got ten minutes extra per hour and a scribe (to do the writing) I remember being nervous for my first exam but I quickly got into the routine and picked off the exams one by one and ended up getting 445 points, 475 with my "Maths bonus."



A lot of consideration went into what I wanted to do in university, but I was sure I wanted to go

It came down to either Commerce or Science as my first choice. The fact that I wanted to go to UCD was never in doubt as it was one of the few colleges at the time with an Access Officer and it was much more wheelchair accessible than the other options.

I chose Commerce as I thought it would be too difficult for me to do experiments in Science.

There were many things which had to be sorted out before I went to college, such as accommodation and Personal Assistants. The accommodation problem was easily solved, as there was a suitable place on campus.

Although there were only a few student wheelchair accessible apartments, the fact that there were only a few student wheelchair users made them relatively easy to get.

However, getting personal assistants proved far more difficult, mainly due to their low pay at the time. This problem was so serious that I nearly ended up leaving university just after arriving there. Also getting funding for the personal assistants was a difficult job in itself.

Eventually these problems were resolved although they were to re-surface periodically and I could now start to concentrate on the smaller problems.



For instance, I started getting class notes from the lecturers, as I wasn't fast enough at writing to take notes myself. Although UCD was wheelchair accessible, the place for wheelchair users in the lecture theatres was at the very back and this was made difficult at times to hear what was being said and read what was displayed on the board/screen.

The three years I spent doing my degree were happy ones and the degree itself was invaluable. It was always the first thing I was asked about in interviews. There is an education grant available for students with disabilities to help them meet the extra cost if anybody is thinking about going down the same road.

I loved my time in UCD but it was always on my mind that someday I would leave and what was going to do then?

I started to think more consciously about my future in my final year of my commerce course. It was apparent to me at the time that I would find it difficult to find a job.

I felt that I needed something extra to tilt the balance in my favour in a competitive world. That and the fact that I wanted to stay another year in college put the idea of a post-graduate degree into my head.



In further deliberations, I decided to stay in UCD, where I knew the lay out and people, rather than introduce an unknown factor. The title of the course I decided to do was 'Masters in Economic Science in European Economic and Public affairs', I think the title drew me towards it!!!

The course involved studying politics, law, economics and business studies. It was a very intensive course, involving classes, exams and writing a thesis.

Writing the thesis was particularly interesting as it involved a lot of research and analysis, something I hadn't done to that level previously.

After finishing my masters, I knew it was time to leave the academic world and find employment.

There were difficulties in finding employment

One of the first things to think about was whether I should put down on my C.V. that I was a disabled wheelchair user. One part of me said that I shouldn't put it down, as it would only help people to discriminate against me. The other part of me said that if didn't, people might perceive it as being sneaky.

Eventually, I decided to leave it in the personal section of my C.V. This is because it would be obvious when I went for an interview anyway. Also, I didn't want to go to the considerable effort and expense of going to interviews for jobs in completely inaccessible buildings.

As well as the anxiety everybody faces in doing interviews, I also had the added worry of whether the interview would be held in a wheelchair accessible location. Then on the day of the interview it was in the back of my mind that I might be questioned about my disability and what was I going to say?

My experience of interviews is mixed, but of course this is the case with most people Sometimes I did well and other times did poorly.

About three times I was asked about my disability and how I was going to manage although I never got a job offer from any of those interviews, I do not believe I was discriminated against in these cases. I believe they were seriously considering taking me on but in the event, decided I was over qualified for those positions.



When I finished my Masters, I quickly found employment in the Mullingar Arts Centre. It was a Community Employment job. Although it was not really what I wanted, I was delighted to get some work experience. This was something that my C.V. was badly lacking.

My job was, more or less, that of a telephonist. I answered queries like what plays were on and put calls through to other people.

After a few months I graduated to accounting and auditing. This was work, which I preferred much more. During the seven months approximately I spent in the Arts Centre I continued to look for employment elsewhere, with little success.

It is important when you are in such a situation that you don't lose heart and give up. This can be difficult at times; especially when it appears that you have come close to your goal but just lost out. Even though I originally thought this was a period of failure, crucially I had taken a few incremental steps forward.

1. I was getting good work experience, working on the SAGE accounting system.
2. My interview technique was improving.
3. I met a person who helped disabled people get employment.

It was important to have somebody else to talk to about my search for employment.

4. During this period I came third on a special panel for a Clerical Officer with Westmeath County Council. At the time I was very disappointed with my performance but it was to become crucial later.
5. I began to design websites; this gave me something else to talk about at interviews and showed how I could work on my own initiative.

After I left the Arts Centre I was immediately offered a job as a Clerical Officer in South Dublin County Council. However the problem of finding suitable accommodation, the cost of accommodation if you could find it, the lack of suitable transport facilities, combined with the fact that I would have to pay a Personal Assistant's rent as well, meant that I had to turn it down. The salary would not cover all these expenses.

This annoyed me at the time, but at least I knew I had the credentials to get a good job.

I now refined my job search to higher paying jobs in Dublin and jobs in Mullingar.

It was during the next seven months of unemployment that I learned just how boring it really was and how hard it is to occupy yourself when you are unemployed. There are just not enough good programmes on T.V. to pass the day and you have to be very careful with your money.

Never the less, I never lost hope, I kept reading the jobs section in the newspapers, sending out C.V.s and attending interviews.

Eventually ordinary Clerical officer positions were advertised for Westmeath County Council.

I studied hard and made sure I was properly prepared for the questions I might be asked. The interview was harder than the special needs panel Clerical Officer one that I had done previously, but my credentials had improved since I had done that interview, I had more work experience and I could talk about my web design. This and the fact that my interview technique had improved led to an improved performance at my interview this time.

Of course there were far more people going for interviews this time around and I was happy when I came sixth on the panel, Although this meant I wouldn't be employed immediately, it was more or less guaranteed that I would get a job offer in the coming months.

As it turned out, I found out that a second person had been employed through the Special needs Panel and I made enquires about whether they would take on a third person and they decided they would.

I started work at the end of February 2003, in the Planning Office. It felt great to finally have a full time permanent job. I started in a research capacity but after a few months started dealing mainly with development levies. It is an interesting and challenging job. The people I work with are great and the I.T. Department are getting me specialised software required.

Before I talk about my goals for the future I want to highlight what the PwDI Organisation must aim for from my experience: -

a) Harmonised Personal Assistant Services throughout the country. Generally, people in the midlands and elsewhere should get the same level of support as in Dublin. It should be possible to easily switch services from one region to another. This is because disabled people must be able to move to where opportunities arise.

b) Disabled employees should get a tax reduction to help them deal with higher levels of expenditure i.e. rent, heating, transport etc.

c) Public bodies should be mandated to employ a significant percentage of people with serious disabilities.

d) More funds should be made available to help disabled people to receive a third level education.

If these policies were introduced I believe it would make a massive difference to the lives of people with disabilities in Ireland.

Finally I would like to talk about my future career plan. I intend to go for promotion opportunities in Westmeath whenever they arise. To this end I have continued with my education and this summer completed a Certificate Course in local Government, my C.V. now looks better than ever and I expect my performance in interviews will continue to improve from now on. It is possible that I may move to a different local authority, only time will tell.

I have become a member of the People with Disabilities in Ireland Westmeath Network committee that will give me the opportunity to use my experience to lobby on behalf of all people with disabilities in County Westmeath and to make things better for other people with disabilities.

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Mark Ahern

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## ***Westmeath Network of People with Disabilities in Ireland***

Wish to congratulate our committee member Mr. Mark Ahern on his achievements to date, wish him well for the future that we know will be pursued with the same focus and determination that he has maintained throughout his life in his academic and working career.

We thank him sincerely for allowing us to produce this booklet on his behalf in the sincere hope that it will benefit other young people with disabilities in understanding Mark's experience and what he has achieved when they read it.

The contents of this booklet remain the property of the author.

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