

The teenagers who find advantages in disadvantage

Long school holidays can exacerbate the social divide but Future Voices is mentoring disadvantaged young people to make the most of life



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Ian Smith, Jodie Milne and Andrew Branagan, participants in the Future Voices programme. Photograph: Nick Bradshaw

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It took five months to find the body of Mairead Healy’s brother after he took his own life at the age of 21 in the River Foyle in Derry.

Working in law in London at the time, she spent countless days during those months pacing the riverbank in her home town, reflecting on why she and Eamonn had gone on completely different paths after growing up in exactly the same family. She and her two siblings were raised by their mother, who was a single parent and an alcoholic, living in poverty in the Bogside.

“I was really lucky, I got educated. He left school with no qualifications and was on the dole for five years.” Unlike him, Healy had passed the 11-plus and got into one of the North’s top grammar schools.



Eamonn was only in his late teens when their mother died. “He had no support whatsoever and there was nothing around for him.”

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day bootcamp.

While the primary goal of Future Voices, which has between 25 and 30 places each year, is to ensure that young people can go on to third-level education, it also helps them to build networks and to foster confidence.

"We base all our programmes in the Law Society of Ireland. I chose that on purpose because I wanted to get a really fancy building," she explains. "I wanted them to feel they could go anywhere." It's a psychological thing. When these young people from disadvantaged areas walk across the plush carpets of the society's headquarters in Blackhall Place and look up at the chandeliers and gold leaf, they can rightly feel that

His death made her think how life could have been different for him and inspired her to set up Future Voices Ireland, of which she is now the CEO. She wanted it to be a long-term, holistic intervention that would provide support and mentoring for young people at risk of being caught up in the sort of hopeless cycle her brother experienced.

"It is not that people from disadvantaged backgrounds are not smart," she points out, but sometimes they don't know how to focus their inner drive. "We are providing the pathway, so they can see what they need to do to go to college, and to get the esteem, self-confidence and empathy they need."

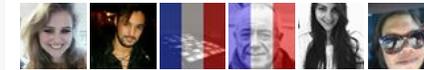
The three-year programme targets applicants from the lowest-performing Deis (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools, of whom typically only 10 to 20 per cent go on to college, says Healy, who is a bubbly dynamo. It involves sessions every Saturday from January to July, as well as various events the rest of the year and, for the first time this summer, a four-

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they belong there too.

“And it has free wifi,” chips in 17-year-old Ian Smith from Ballyfermot in Dublin, to loud guffaws.

He is one of three participants in the Future Voices bootcamp who have volunteered to talk to *The Irish Times*, not only about how the four-day event helped to break the summer boredom but to discuss what being members of that socio-economic grouping referred to as “disadvantaged youth” means in reality.

“It’s not nice being at a disadvantage,” begins Jodie Milne, who is 16 and lives in Finglas. She is the middle of three children and is going into fifth year at St Michael’s Holy Faith Secondary School, Finglas.

“But it’s true,” points out Andrew Branagan, who is also 16, also from Finglas, is an only child and is going into fifth year at New Cross College.

“You can’t deny it,” Jodie agrees. “I was trying to get a summer job this year and someone will look at your CV and see ‘Finglas’ – or any other disadvantaged area – and throw it aside.”

“That happened in front of me,” says Andrew. When he applied for work in a city-centre clothes shop, the manager “looked at me and said ‘you’re from Finglas – oh, okay’ and he just put it down. I knew I wasn’t getting that job. However sometimes it’s handy because ...”

“People are afraid of you,” interjects Ian, with another deadpan one-liner.

But Andrew and Jodie explain how it is “like a bond” when you encounter people who also grew up in Finglas, as he did when being interviewed for work experience in an electrical shop during transition year. A recognition, perhaps, that the “wrong”

address makes life that much harder, even in a relatively small city like Dublin.

So what do they think their peers in more affluent areas have that they don't?

“I know they definitely have more subject choices and they can definitely get the subjects they need,” says Jodie. “This year I had to fight to get an extra science class to be put in because they were only giving us biology; they wouldn't do physics or chemistry. I think it's down to numbers.”

She is now going to be able to study phys-chem – the two subjects combined – for her Leaving Certificate.

“I got it eventually but it was difficult,” says Jodie who is considering applying for medicine.

Andrew is interested in science or law, or business and accountancy. His school, Patrician College, amalgamated with Mater Christi last September to form New Cross College.

“Now there are more subjects but still it is nothing to what other schools get.”

Ian says he got the subjects he wanted but he is not sure what he going to do after his Leaving Cert next June. “I am good at Spanish so I would like to follow that. Or I would like to study at King's Inns – to be a barrister.”

Clearly they all have high aspirations so, when lack of expectations is often cited as an obstacle for disadvantaged youth, where do they think these come from?

“I think it's because you want to make a difference to the stereotypes put on you,” says Jodie. “It pushes you to try to achieve what you want.”

“It’s like an extra drive,” agrees Andrew. They see people who are sucked into the stereotype of disadvantage, believing there is no point in even doing their Leaving Cert.

All three are the first generation within their families to be aiming for third-level straight after school.

Jodie’s father is a taxi driver and her mother left school at 14 but ended up studying fine art and design as a mature student in her 30s, after going back to do her Leaving Cert, but she can’t find a job in her field at the moment.

Andrew’s mother is a single parent and carer for his granny. “She never did the Leaving Cert and left school when she was 16 after the Junior Certificate.” Ian’s father works in a pub and his mother is a carer in a hospital.

Two years ago when Andrew started Future Voices he was really shy – “never able to speak in public, never able to speak to anybody”.

If it wasn’t for Future Voices, “I would be terrified right now,” agrees Jodie, as we talk in the Ombudsman for Children’s Office (OCO), which has given Healy’s organisation space in its premises on Great Strand Street. Yet in the past year Jodie has made a presentation to Aodhán Ó Ríordáin TD, Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality, during which she compared the 40 and 46A buses. One takes you to a €36 million public library in Dún Laoghaire, the other to a controversial centre for homeless women drug addicts in Finglas that has caused problems for local residents.

That sense of a city of two halves is exacerbated during the long school holidays, when teenagers from more affluent homes may get the chance to take memorable three-week trips to the Gaeltacht, as well as enjoying time abroad and leisure activities at home. For those in disadvantaged areas, the three months can be dead time.

Future Voices decided to run the bootcamp as a way of getting them engaged over the summer, says Healy, who credits intern Seán O'Rourke with the idea. A son of the RTÉ broadcaster of the same name, O'Rourke, who is 20, came home to work in Dublin for the summer from Boston College, where he is about to go into his third year of studying applied psychology and human development.

With no school and without money for camps or holidays, at a time when many clubs also cease activities, there can be a void in these teenagers' lives, he points out.

“We were realising that a lot of them were at a loose end,” says Healy. “Their confidence can become affected – sitting up all night playing computer games and then going back to school after these three months of doing nothing.”

Only Jodie admits to fairly typical teenage behaviour of not getting up until 2pm these days, if she doesn't have to. While she goes to bed at 11pm or 11.30pm most nights, she doesn't go to sleep until 4am or 4.30am.

Netflix is her “go to” but she enjoys Instagram and Facebook as well. However, playing camogie with Erin's Isle gets her out of the house for training twice a week, and for matches. She is also involved in the Scouts and her family went to Galway for a week this year.

By comparison, both Andrew and Ian are very early risers, and are usually up at about 8am. Andrew typically spends the morning out with friends, returns home for lunch and then maybe plays football in the afternoons.

The evenings are passed “usually walking around Finglas, not really doing much. Then I come back in around 10.30pm, 11pm.” He stays up until about 2am and 3am – gaming, watching Netflix and using Twitter and Facebook.

Ian likes to go to the local Dublin City Council gym in the mornings but his training at Cherry Orchard boxing club is reduced from three times to just once a week during the summer.

“I think in general there is not a lot for young people to do, especially for free,” says Jodie. “It is not like we have jobs and stuff.”

All three tried to get summer jobs and Ian works in a local pub on Sundays but the other two didn't find anything. “You feel as young person you don't want to rely on your parents for everything because you are at that awkward stage where you are expected to act as an adult, yet you are treated like a kid,” says Jodie.

She believes a youth club specifically for teenagers is what's needed in her area because when they meet up with friends in public spaces “you will have the police coming up to you saying you are causing trouble because you're young people in a big group”.

They all have experience of being moved on by gardaí and Jodie says it is “definitely” more likely to happen in Finglas than in the city centre where she now more often meets friends.

“On your own, nobody would mind you,” says Andrew. “Once you are in a group of teenagers, especially as all my mates are lads, they look at us and it's like ‘they must be doing drugs or they must be going in to drink’ – and all we're doing is looking for a football to play a game or something.” This annoys him.

“It is just like the whole stereotype,” he points out, that stems not just from their age but the area they live in.

“People aren't really known to be the best out of Finglas, if you know what I mean.

They haven't exactly got the best reputation: it's not half as bad as it's made out to be."

Ian suggests that his area needs some facility like a hall with pool tables and goal posts: "somewhere that you can just go and chill instead of paying money for it". However, there is a really good library, he says, where he studies in term time.

During the bootcamp, which mixed morning workouts in the Phoenix Park with sessions led by inspirational speakers at the OCO in the afternoon, the participants went to the Forty Foot in south Dublin and finished up in the nearby, beautifully maintained People's Park in Dún Laoghaire.

Healy recalls how one of the guys from Ballyfermot, looking around him, said he didn't feel he belonged in such a posh area. Yet, she points out, it is a public park that the taxpayer is paying for.

The manicured gardens were "a bit weird", agrees Andrew. "My park has burn marks, broken glass and stuff on it, syringes . . .". A few kilometres apart, says O'Rourke, "but worlds away from each other".

The day we talk, Healy has just got confirmation that Minister for Education and Skills Jan O'Sullivan will meet members of Future Voices at the beginning of September, in their patch; a house in Ballyfermot.

It was the young people's idea that the Minister come to one of their homes. They not only want her to experience their environment but to show they are equals as hosts.

While Future Voices may be about trying to ensure that no one demographic is excluded from leadership opportunities in all walks of life, young people on the margins already have plenty to say: when they're given half a chance.

Fr McVerry: ‘I thought what he’s doing is incredible’

The most memorable part of the whole Future Voices summer bootcamp was undoubtedly a talk about homelessness by Fr Peter McVerry.

“He’s a brilliant speaker: it was very personal and touching, I just loved it. I thought what he’s doing is incredible,” says Jodie Milne, from Finglas, who is 16.

As youngsters living in disadvantaged areas who have stereotyped views of themselves to contend with, they could identify with Fr McVerry’s ongoing efforts to dispel persisting perceptions that homeless people are all alcoholics and drugs addicts. As he explains, the majority of homeless people now are just people who can’t afford to pay the rent; yet they are invisible, unlike those on the streets.

“He opened everybody’s eyes to the genuine people you wouldn’t even know are affected by it,” she says.

“He showed us that most homeless people are treated as ‘below people’ – they are not treated as a person,” says Andrew Branagan, who is also 16 and from Finglas. “Even saying ‘hello’ to them would help them a lot.”

For his part, Fr McVerry says the Future Voices participants were very receptive and enthusiastic. In his experience, teenagers generally have a very strong sense of fairness: “They absorb what you are saying, they do reflect on it and they do want to act on it.”

That gives him great hope but “it also raises a challenge for the Church. The Church is not tapping into the energy, enthusiasm and commitment that young people have, which for me is far more important than the sacraments and going to Mass”.

And talking of stereotypes, it seems Fr McVerry also did his bit for altering the teenagers' view of priests.

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TomMcElligott

An inspirational article; well done to the founder and all those involved in such a worthwhile initiative. It is sad that in a modern country where you are born can dictate your chances of living a happy and fruitful life. Finglas, Ballyfermot, Ballymun and

other parts of our capital city are often termed disadvantaged areas but there is huge hope and opportunity here too, it just needs to be tapped in the right way. Only caveat I have with the article is it seems third level and college are the... [» more](#)

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