

Journalism student pursues his dream

Journalism student Robbie Morrissey recently spoke to Fionnuala Murphy about his experiences of college life as a student with a vision impairment and the preparation that helped him in adjusting to college in a new city.

Robbie, who is 20 years-old and from Kilkenny city, has just completed his second year of a BA in Journalism in Griffith College Dublin. Coming from Kilkenny to Dublin for college is daunting for any school leaver but particularly so for Robbie, who has a vision impairment, and also had to consider how he would access college materials and get around independently in a new environment. But Robbie, who has wanted to be a journalist since he was 15, was well prepared for the challenge, finding solutions in technology to make the transition easier.

Although being identified as different in the class room was difficult for Robbie when he was younger, he believes that persisting is essential in order to progress. "I learned to touch type when I was 10 and in primary school. I have nystagmus and have always used technology to help me in the classroom, as well as sitting up close to the board. When I was in primary school I didn't want the technology because I didn't want people judging me. But I needed it and it's not worth getting held back because I didn't want people to see it," explained Robbie.

While the technology available to him has improved over the years, there are still practical difficulties in using it. In secondary school Robbie used a portable video magnifier called an Opti Verso, to

magnify text books and the information on the board. But this had to be brought to each classroom and set up ahead of class and was also kept in the school overnight as it was on loan from the Department of Education. Getting large print books was also a slow process because the text books are changed each year and so they were not immediately available in the format he required.

I needed it so I had to persevere

Although the visibility of his condition was a concern from time to time in school, Robbie now believes that it is of benefit to others in his situation to know what someone else has experienced. "The Opti Verso, which I got through the Department of Education, NCBI and Ash Technologies, attracted attention when I got it first but I needed it, so I had to persevere. I also used the support of a special needs assistant in both primary and secondary school and the visiting teacher service in primary school. I was the first person in my school with a vision impairment but I know there has been at least one other since I left and I think that the school is now more prepared. They know what supports are in place and it has helped them to accommodate other students," according to Robbie.

In an effort to help other students in his position, Robbie writes a blog called robmoro.com and has also written a blog for the Guardian in the UK on advice for students with vision impairments, which has just been published on their 'Blogging Students' site. "I submitted a piece on what it is like to be a student with a vision impairment because part of the problem

is learning what supports are out there. I wanted to talk about my own experience but also reach out to people who wouldn't be familiar with the services that are available. It's not just NCBI, there's also the DARE scheme (Disability Access Route to Education), for example."

In preparation for college, Robbie attended a DARE summer school in UCD when he was in 5th year in secondary school. The two-week residential course acted as a great taster to college life. The first week focused on revision for the Leaving Cert and the second was more about college life and getting used to a large campus. It was also a chance to experience living independently for the first time. In addition to this Robbie did work experience in his local newspaper and spent a lot of time researching college courses to work towards his goal of studying journalism.

Before starting in Griffith College he attended an open day to find out more about how the college would be able to accommodate him and worked with the disability officer in the college to ensure that he had access to written materials. Although funding for an Opti Verso was not available through the college, Robbie uses a number of other tools to make sure he can access college books and notes.

"Everyone uses laptops in college and I still use handheld magnifiers. They have lights and are small enough to carry around so I can look at the notes that



Robbie Morrissey.

are passed around during a lecture. But everything is uploaded to Moodle, which is an online learning platform, so I don't strain too much to see the notes as I have access to it all online afterwards. I also use Dragon Dictate (voice recognition software) so I can wear a headset and talk and it'll type it for me."

Robbie's advice for other students with vision impairments is to persevere and to find out what supports are out there. "I would tell others to stick with it, it gets easier. When I looked into the options available it opened my eyes. There are options out there. If I think about how I would have done without any support and advice – probably not very well."

To read Robbie's blog visit www.robmore.com and the Blogging Students page on www.theguardian.com. ■