

The Equal Initiative

A SPECIAL REPORT

is forged in Ireland



Main photograph: Longford Women in Business

Far left: LEAP participants attending law lectures at Trinity College Dublin

Left and right: Participants from the Transition Supports Programme



The Longford Equal Project Claire Egan

"Baking was always a passion of mine and it would have been my dream to start up my own business. I worked for different hotels and shops over the years and always ended up baking for them.

I heard about a start your own business course that the Longford Equal programme was doing with the Longford County Enterprise Board. It was really helpful. It was very inspiring and encouraging and gave me the final push to start up my baking business, Cakes 4 Life.

Before I started, I knew I had to do my research, so I went out to different shops and filling stations with samples of my products and asked them if they would be interested in selling it.

I got a great response from a lot of them, so I started operating the business from home in Newtowncashel in January 2004.

I would bake all sorts of different homemade breads, cakes, tarts and scones. I'm always trying to come up with new ideas to expand the range and the new products I have introduced to the shops are doing well so far.

My daughter and my husband would help me out with it. It's going very well so far and there are long hours; I get up at 5.30am every day.

The EQUAL programme was always there if I needed any advice. We still have meetings once a month to meet the other women and we discuss any problems or give advice, and we get guest speakers who are always very interesting.

The EQUAL programme really gave me the incentive to say to myself "just stand on your own two feet and get out there and do it, Claire". I did encounter problems along the way, especially being a woman in business in a rural area.

Some of the men delivering bread were none too pleased to see a woman coming along with products on the same shelves they stocked. I just had to be firm and stand my ground and tell them there was room for everyone.

You have to be strong and positive and believe in your product. You can't go into setting up a business half-heartedly; you have to be prepared to give it 100 per cent.

I would really recommend the Equal programme because I gained so much from meeting other women and listening to the experiences of the women guest speakers. You'll always have problems to overcome at the beginning, but stick with it."

THE LONGFORD EQUAL PROJECT EXPLAINED

The Longford Equal project dedicated itself to supporting female entrepreneurship in the Longford area through identifying key barriers that women found in setting up and sustaining themselves in business. Its aim was to devise and find innovative ways to address and overcome these barriers for women who wanted to set up a business.

Between 2002 and 2007, over 200 women



will have availed of one or more of the keys supports piloted through EQUAL. These are enterprise training, IT training, their Women in business network, one-to-one mentoring and "visibility" activities like role modelling and showcasing.

As well as these training and mentoring programmes, the project helped women who wanted one-stop information and referral and others talked to the project as part of their outreach efforts in raising awareness. The project engaged in different ways with around 500 local women.

The initial 200 core women were involved in two distinct phases of the EQUAL project. EQUAL round one, 2002-2005, was focused on business start-up and EQUAL round two, 2005-2007, was focused on business sustainability. Of those 200 women, 34 have set up businesses specifically using an EQUAL support, while just over 100 have used EQUAL to develop or promote an existing business.

Equal Legal Education for All (Leap) project Mary Stokes (32)

"This was a life changing experience for me and I'm so glad I did it. I only went as far as primary school when I was a young girl and that was when we lived in Kilkenny. I was always involved in voluntary work and different projects trying to stop discrimination and help accommodation programmes in the Travelling community.

I always had an interest in further education, but never knew how to go about it. A lady called Elizabeth Davidson came around to one of the groups I was involved in and spoke about the Leap project and how people could get involved in training for the legal profession.

I applied for the course and thankfully got into the programme which was based in the University Access Centre in Limerick. We started with introduction to the legal system, which is a Fetac level-five course.

We had two summer schools and the second one was based in Trinity College, which was quite an experience. If it wasn't for this course, I don't think I would have ever got the opportunity to see the college, let alone study in it.

At the beginning, I was a bit nervous about whether I could do it, but I am the kind of person that if I set my mind to it, I'll just go for it. I really enjoyed the whole thing and it broadened my mind to education and learning new things.

I passed the exam in introduction to legal studies, so now I have the second exam in business law and employment coming up. The whole experience has been mind-blowing, it has inspired me to further my education and I'm looking into doing a computer course as I would like to get the ECDL.



The course has just finished and I'm very sad. I suppose that would be my one let down with the course, that it's not going to continue. It was two years of very hard work and commitment and we had the greatest support from everyone at Leap and now it will be gone.

One of the most enjoyable parts of the programme was the transnational study visits to Slovakia, where we learned about the Roma people and we also went to Strasbourg, where we visited the European Court of Human Rights and the European Council.

With programmes like this, the Travelling community has the chance to get educa-

tion that wouldn't normally be accessible. It has broadened my horizons to realise that you have to go out there and make opportunities for yourself."

LEAP EXPLAINED

The aim of the Legal Education For All (Leap) project was to open up employment opportunities for people from disadvantaged backgrounds in the legal profession. This project combined settled people and Travellers in one project. Refugees as well as marginalised groups and people from disadvantaged backgrounds participated in the project.

LEAP organised pre-accredited, pre-law course training and employment placement assistance to participants. There were support mechanisms in place during the training and placements with mentoring and counselling. They worked in conjunction with a number of groups including Trinity College, Fás and the Dublin Solicitors' Bar Association. There were three learning centres for the project. One was based in Dublin, the Limerick group covered Ennis, Kerry and Tipperary, and there was a Donegal group in Letterkenny. Central to the LEAP project was creating access routes to legal education. From the 28 people who originally started the project, 11 have graduated for the Legal Studies Certificate from the National College of Ireland and more are following through with further training or exams.

One participant has progressed to become a freshman in Trinity Law School and another has been accepted at King's Inns for the diploma in legal studies and will take up their studies in 2008.

Equal Willing Able and Mentoring (WAM) Louis Watters

"I graduated from Dublin City University in 2005 after completing the BA in journalism. It was something I really enjoyed and thought I'd never be able to do because of my visual impairment. As part of the DCU course, you go on a work placement and mine was with the *Irish Medical Times* and I really enjoyed it. But when the time came to apply for jobs, I was entirely without work experience.

Unlike lots of other teenagers who get their first taste of working life in a summer job working in a shop or a hotel, my visual disability had prevented me from taking up part-time jobs, so I had no work experience.

After graduating, I started sending out CVs to lots of different media outlets and wasn't getting any response back, so it was really soul destroying as I was hungry to get work.

After about a year of being out of work, I heard an advertisement on the radio for the WAM project. It recognises the difficulties that graduates with disabilities have in getting their first steps on the career ladder. The mentoring project is aimed at trying to give graduates like myself that opportunity by providing work placements in both the public and private sector.

In the WAM project, you give your top three preferences of where you would like to work from the list of companies available. Luckily, I got my first preference and started a six-month work-placement with the Department of Agriculture and Food. I was attracted to the Civil Service for the same reason that I was attracted to journalism. I really felt it was my chance to give

something back to society and try to help out citizens.

I worked in the food division and was involved in a lot of interesting projects like the regional food forums, where I travelled around the country, and the European geographical indication scheme.

Brendan Smith was the junior minister for food while I was there and I would have written a lot of his speeches, so it was great to get the chance to use my writing skills. After the six-month placement, I was given a six-month extension and it gave me even more experience within the department.

It was an absolutely brilliant placement and I really realise the benefits of having such work experience on my CV now. Projects like WAM are so important in Ireland, especially for groups that might be excluded from the working world and it really gave me the start I needed in my career."

'I did a six-month work-placement with the Dept of Agriculture and Food'

WAM EXPLAINED

The aim of the Willing Able and Mentoring (WAM) project was to identify the major barriers of graduates with disabilities in the mainstream Irish labour market. It was a pilot survey that worked by developing a structured mentored work placement programme.

This approach benefited the graduates with disabilities and employers. Graduates with disabilities got to avail of much needed mainstream work experience and employers got the opportunity to trial and review their policies and procedures with an equality hat on. WAM has been running for the past three years and has worked in partnership with major Irish employers; IBM, Bank of Ireland, Hamilton, Osborne King, the Civil Service, Fás, Irish Life & Permanent, and others including GET AHEAD - the national forum of graduates with disabilities, National Learning Network, DCU, Access Ability and The Aisling Foundation.

Mentoring is central to WAM and all successfully placed applicants are assigned a mentor. Their mentor is someone who works in the same organisation but is not the graduate's direct line manager and they try to increase the speed and effectiveness of the social integration of the participant.

Forty seven people have been placed during WAM, with some placements still ongoing.

WAM as an EQUAL funded project will come to an end in December this year, but AHEAD intends to continue the work of the project and support employers into 2008.

"It's very important that people in rural areas have access to computers and e-learning facilities. Before I started with the CLLN, I would have only had a very basic knowledge of computers, but with the programme I've learned so many skills like e-mail, desktop publishing and Microsoft programs.

I was a founding member of the West Clare Resource Centre which used to be the Miltown Malbay's vocational school. The school was a disused building, but we worked hard on getting it funding and turning into something for the area.

We worked along with the VEC, who had access to the Equal funding and set up a programme as part of the CLLN to provide e-learning. I took part in it myself to learn computer skills and it was a fantastic resource to have.

It's a drop-in centre for people so they can use it when it suits them, so you don't have to worry about missing a week, you can do it at your own pace. We had a tremendous response from people in the area and they were from all age groups, people from 16 right up to 80. I would have been very anxious and very keen to improve my computer skills and I think that goes for people of my age group. People can be frightened of computers, but I really found with this course that the generation gap didn't make any difference; everybody wanted to be tuned into modern technology.

I'd strongly advocate the programme principally because it shows how a centre like this can be such a success in a rural setting. To have the access to learning computer skills and have the centre readily available has been invaluable for people in the locality.

The tutors there are excellent and always help with any questions. It was great to have

Clare Lifelong Learning Network (CLLN) Christy Curtin (60)



CLLN EXPLAINED

Clare Lifelong Learning Network (CLLN) is a network of more than 80 organisations from Co Clare all involved in further, adult or community education. It involves the provision of different facilities and resources to achieve its aim of establishing a lifelong learning system within Co Clare.

Working in partnership is significant to CLLN and they designed a partnership toolkit with their members to identify the important elements of the shared work and who was responsible for what. The ICT strand of CLLN focuses on the use of ICT to support communications, learning and management activities of the network members. The CLLN website is the main communications tool. A calendar lists activities or events that may be of interest to members and events.

The website provides up to date information on more than 150 courses available in Co Clare. There is access to a learner's forum and separate tutor's forum for adult learners and adult tutors to communicate with one another. The CLLN management information system provides a database used to register learners and track their progression.

CLLN have put in place seven community-based, e-learning facilities throughout the county. The learners attending these facilities, aged from 16 to 80, have different levels of ability, education and skill. An e-learning facilitator is present so the learners can choose a plan to complete the programme at a time and pace that suits them. In the past two years, more than 200 learners have used the centres.