

INSIGHT FROM IRELAND



ONE EYE DOCTOR yelled at her when she couldn't read the test charts. She accused Melissa McQueen, then 7 years old, of faking a vision problem simply to gain attention.

She sometimes failed tests when teachers wouldn't acknowledge that, glasses or no glasses, she could not see the front chalkboard to follow lessons.

She would explain her diagnosis to peers, only to have them shrink away from a potential friendship.

So McQueen, now an independent 21-year-old, stopped talking about the blurry world before her eyes nearly altogether. Her unrecognizable genetic disorder, Stargardt's Disease, remained a secret to everyone except for her family members and closest friends.

That was until the MSU pre-law student encountered a ground-breaking summer study abroad experience.

LEADERS REPRESENTING MSU's study abroad and disability programs turned to College of Education Professor Michael Leahy hoping for an answer to a long-standing concern: few students with disabilities participate in international learning experiences.

Leahy, who directs the country's top-ranked rehabilitation counseling program, soon began determining how he could adapt an existing course for a monthlong summer excursion overseas. Whereas "Disability in a Diverse Society" (CEP 470) offered a suitable starting point, Ireland became an ideal destination.

The European nation has just been through a "seismic" change in dis-

ability law, making it "probably the most progressive of any country in the world." Leahy knew it could be a powerful laboratory for students—both with or without disabilities—to gain greater awareness, sensitivity and understanding of various aspects of disability in the United States and Ireland.

MSU picked up some widespread attention while organizers prepped for a summer 2007 trip, including a mention by *The New York Times*. Many universities struggle to extend study abroad options to students with disabilities, let alone offer them one focused on examining issues related to their own experiences at an international level.

"There has never been a project like this," said Leahy, who coordinated logistics and necessary accommodations with Valerie Nilson, a specialist from the MSU Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities.

Ten undergraduate students, including four from other universities as far away as Oregon and Alaska, signed up to explore Ireland's beautiful shoreline and a depth of disability practices and policies in Dublin.

AS FOR MCQUEEN, who studies Arabic with an interest in pursuing international law, she was searching for ways to get to Egypt when the new program caught her attention.

Maybe, she thought, it would be a place where she could go without feeling uncomfortable about her impairment.

GROUND-BREAKING STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM DIGS INTO DISABILITY ISSUES >> Nicole Geary

It was.

She was surrounded by people who shared her setbacks and yet through so many different perspectives. There were students in wheelchairs, young people who are deaf and a dozen different college majors.

Then in the mix of field trips and class sessions, one particular guest speaker cemented a personal change that had been gradual for her until then. Carolyn Casey was a legally blind, Irish leader of an organization that advises CEOs in meeting the needs of employees with disabilities.

"Her past mimicked mine," McQueen said. "Hearing her kind of made me realize that I would really like to get involved in disability rights, to help improve situations for people."

So after graduating this spring, she now plans to attend law school with an inclination toward representing individuals with disabilities. She hopes to return to Dublin for a full semester through an existing study abroad program if she is accepted to DePaul University in Chicago.

LEAHY AND NILSON were very pleased with the success of their first-time trip.

Each of the students emerged with similarly enlightened perspectives, achieved through interacting with Ireland's leading scholars and disability service providers—and each other.

Major concepts framed by the course syllabus quickly evolved into lively discussions. Participants also conducted independent studies linked to their academic and life interests.

"Running into an inaccessible building became part of their learning . . . and also how people reacted" to the circumstances," Leahy said. "The sheer amount of learning the students were able to obtain surprised me."

Leahy had never coordinated a study abroad trip before but he and other organizers, along

with a panel of students, were invited to present at a universitywide best practices conference on multiculturalism and diversity in November.

Together with a long list of established academic and community-based Irish partners, they plan to continue the course next summer and have every intention to continue in the years to come.

Future trips could open Leahy and his College of Education colleagues to fruitful research opportunities, especially as Ireland models an innovative "universal design" policy that frames disability as a natural, not minority, aspect of life.

The hosting institution, Dublin City University, and others could be places from which Leahy recruits outstanding students for MSU's graduate-level rehabilitation counseling programs.

WHEN IT CAME TIME this fall to recruit for the second "Disability in a Diverse Society" Ireland trip at the MSU Study Abroad Fair, McQueen volunteered.

She sat alone at the information booth. Even if she couldn't see the faces of more than 50 prospective student participants, she told them to go and challenge their ideas about disability and, with them, the misconceptions of the world around them.

Her secret is now her motivation.

"(The trip) was the first time . . . when I had that many people give me such a positive reaction about being a person with a disability," she said. "It was one of those things that changes your life."



DISABILITY IN A DIVERSE SOCIETY: ABOUT THE TRIP

SPONSOR: College of Education

DATES: June 2 to June 27, 2008

COURSE: CEP 470, 490; graduate credit also available

CREDITS: Minimum of six

REQUIREMENTS: 2.00 grade point-average

FEE: \$2,460 (in 2007); scholarships available

DEADLINE: March 1; however, students are urged to apply as soon as possible to process a request for reasonable accommodation

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ON THE WEB: <http://studyabroad.msu.edu/programs/iredisability.html>