How did you get involved in Youth work ultimately the course?

I had studied at Queen's university from 1969 – 1972 and then left for Westhill to study a postgrad in youth work. Youth work was something that I hadn't intended to do. While at Queens, during the early part of the 'troubles' when vigilantes were looking after the community I had been asked to 'look after the kids'. With communities under threat I worked with young people in the local youth club in the church hall. That gave me the first taste for working with young people. Some of my friends weren't as lucky and ended up in the paramilitaries.

It was at West Hill that I met Richard Louden and that was the start of a long friendship. When we came back to Northern Ireland he worked in Project Bangor and I worked in detached youth work in East Belfast. After a couple of years, Richard went on to work in the Poly (now Ulster University, Jordanstown) in the youth work team. At that stage, in 1973 when the degree started at the Poly, there were only 18 qualified youth workers in Northern Ireland. I joined the youth work team in June 1979 and taught community development. The degree 'formula' at that time was based on four things, groupwork, individual work, agency management and community work. I had the community portfolio from the beginning. I was a member of staff from June 1979 until 2018.

What are your enduring memories of that period?

I was the first in my family to go to university and as such this became a feature of the course. Often people got the job first and then went on to the course. Entry requirements were low so students could access the course not because they were particularly academic but because they were ready for training. This widening access agenda has always been an emphasis of the course with 'hands on' tutorials and pastoral care a dominant feature. I remember Frankie (McNally) going around to student's houses to support them with their essays.

What do you feel is the essence of the course?

Well the formula I came up with was that I thought there are 3 components to training a youth worker, the '**who', 'why' and 'how'**. The need for self awareness, building on someone's strengths, to be a good youth worker you need to examine yourself, '**who'** are you. In a way that became Frankie's and Richard's domain. And the '**why'** came in second, why do you want to do this job is a key question that I used to do around ideology and the **'how'** you do it, while significant is not something you start with - how's the easy part. Many people I found who came onto the course, had the how. They maybe weren't aware they couldn't put labels on it, they couldn't say - this is such and such a skill – and I'm doing this and doing that. So the who, why and how became the formula that I felt we worked within and around so the whole essence of the work is getting the foundation of self examination and understanding , building from the strengths, now known as strength based youth work. We didn't have that vocabulary then.

People hadn't started writing about young people and the troubles and whatever else. And the other thing that struck me and it came from Derek's (Wilson) fingerprint. The heavy influence of community relations and the understanding of teaching oppression through the eyes of sectarianism, would have been what Derek brought. I was struck very early on that the troubles weren't left at the door and I mean that in the best sense. It wasn't one of those situations that if it's outside the door –we're now going to talk about youth work. People brought experiences and that became a feature of how we taught the course - through the eyes and experiences of the people that were there. Because there wasn't heavy traffic from England or anywhere else, of people wanting to come on the course. The very essence of the beginning of the course which was about indigenous people working

in communities coming and learning youth work and getting a qualification, that was always a very essential part of the course.

It brought us into a wee bit of controversy with regard to validations and it certainly got me annoyed at times because we were dependent on validation and endorsement from England. The question they had was 'where's the race'. In a way I could see they were right, our case was always that you understand oppression through your experience. It's not that we only teach them about understanding sectarianism, you understand oppression by virtue of that and that gave motivation and impetus for NSETS (North South Education Training Standards) getting started - because of the need and necessity for us to validate and endorse our own course. And it was my passion to teach from that point of view. So, 'Who are you?' necessitates you looking at the context of where you're living, which is my community. So the essence of teaching for me was always the simplicity of **who, why** and **how**, and therefore whenever we were going forward and looking for staff I was always conscious of fitting them to how they would contribute to that formula. So you couldn't have everybody in the self-awareness end of things, you need a balance of people to come and teach skills and whatever else was necessary. And the skills is also about the dependency on placements and the quality of placements, it's been a big feature of the course.

What have been some of the key milestone over the past 50 years?

We always had a strong emphasis on top quality teaching. The other thing I thought we did well was the 'can-do needs response' to the field. If something was needing done, the curriculum needed a response, so that's when the certificate came along, the post grad came along, the willingness to rather than stand still and say we have a part time and we have a full time diploma - we were the first to go all-degree, and as a poly we went all degree. That was 1978, when we argued for the first degree and that was the 2+2 model. In the first 2 years students did a foundation and then chose different routes at the end of it one of which was youth work or social work, psychology etc. In a way some of the limitations of it was, you probably thought you were trying to make youth workers out of people who didn't have the passion that traditionally we were used to. But the first degree was '78 so that was ground breaking in nature…

Another milestone was that in 1984 the Poly becoming a university, that stands out for me for a number of reasons. Because in a way it was an interesting transformation – there are people who will still call it a poly by virtue of the experience they had and that loyalty was to that experience. I'm often struck with people I meet now who talk in revering terms of their experience of the poly. While there were plusses and minuses the conversation changed. When people said "I'm the first person in my family to go to higher education" they then said "I'm the first person in my family to go to university". That had a stronger message in communities –and I don't mean that in any …that it was better to go to university than poly. But it meant something in universities to say that and that pride of going to university.

Although the university systems became more bureaucratic we were constantly trying to ensure this didn't disadvantage students. We weren't in the business of failure, and tried to figure out how best do we assess this student and give them the award they deserve. It became this, how do we get around this system, this formulaic system. So the shift on the one hand was good for we're now a university and youth work's in a university but with it came the necessary trappings of bureaucracy that would intrude. So the essence of what we were doing in youth work hopefully didn't change but it did start to influence things very much, it started to change the nature of who we employed. I think one of the early lecturers had very few qualifications when he started - I don't mean that disrespectfully as he was rich in experience, I think his background was very self-taught, a guru I

would say, wonderful I hope, I'm not putting him down. But he had a basic qualification in youth work, basic in the sense of a 2 year diploma. But right throughout my time we would seek to find people that could teach and inspire regardless of their qualification.

So we're coming to the end of the interview , I know this is a tricky question but if you had to leave one message to the future generations of youth workers what would it be?

I don't know Mark if there's a single message. When I started doing youth work by virtue of being asked to look after young people it was something, it gave me something and when I think about your question one of the first things that came into my mind - my wife reminds me of this all the time - it was a young lad, who I had worked with on the streets. He came over to me, and said I want to give you this and, I get emotional about this because he died a year later, he said I want to give you this because without you, I wouldn't be here, and George Johnston (another youth worker) wrote about something similar, someone said to him, it was either youth work or it was death. That drama, that dramatic choice where by virtue of where you lived might have taken you on a path that might have been dangerous. So for me, and my message to students, if you get one thank you in your life and you feel that way about it you can be a good youth worker. Because good youth work is really something for me is born in a feeling that you've got for other people and particular young people and if you've got that passion you've got to keep that fire lit which is a bit clichéd. If you believe in being a youth worker you've got to keep that energy right; whatever choice you make. My choice was an easy choice because I came away from a difficult fieldwork experience to the luxury of talking about it rather than doing it, and when I encounter people who are still doing it I have a great respect for them.