

Name: Nicky Kells

What did you do prior to applying for the course?

I left school at 16 with three GCSE qualifications. I was in a place where I hated study and felt university wasn't for me, but I knew I needed some more qualifications to get a job. So, I moved from Fermanagh to Belfast and studied child care. After this I was a nanny for a year which I really enjoyed and thought that's what I would continue doing but that summer I was involved in voluntary youth activities and loved it. An opportunity arose for me to head back to Fermanagh where I took up the role of youth worker in my home church, which I did for two years. There I had the opportunity to be involved in projects locally and regionally. One of the highlights was bringing a group of young people to Kenya for a month. On returning home from the Kenya trip, it was time to pack my bags again and move back to Belfast to take on another youth work role in a different church. There I was involved in schools work, community work, working with uniformed organisations and some larger scale pieces of work. Then in 2004, skiing down the side of a mountain in Colorado, I decided it was time for another change - I wanted a move away from faith-based work. A friend had taken over managing EOTAS and needed a temporary worker for a few months - youth work being youth work, I stayed for 14 years!

When did you do the course and what led you to apply?

I was fortunate enough to have the Education Authority fund the four years of my part-time course. It did fill me with fear and trepidation, however, as I was still in a place where I thought I hated study and that university wasn't for me. I did apply with a lot of coaxing and support from my manager at the time which, in hindsight, I am extremely thankful for as completing the degree has opened a plethora of opportunities

I started the course in 2009 on Magee campus part-time (I had filled the form in thinking it was alternate years Magee & Jordanstown but alas it was four years driving over Glenshane pass! I now read most forms thoroughly!).

Key milestones or memories from the programme

My external placement was in Lisburn YMCA which was my first experience of attending and working in a youth centre. It was a real pleasure to experience the various programmes that went on weekly and I still pop in there from time to time.

I was fortunate during my degree to have amazing external supervisors who challenged and supported me. They also gave me the confidence to push myself to read more and to achieve more.

The weekly drive to Magee over the four years do stick out, as I car shared with a colleague - let's just say by the end of the four years the world was well and truly put to rights!

Where are you now and what lies ahead for youth work?

During my youth work journey, I have had the amazing privilege of working with young people who I call my wee wonders, some of whom were looked after in foster care and children's residential homes, listening to their stories I applied for a post as a house parent in a newly established therapeutic children's home where I worked 120 hours in the home and then 120 hours off. This model gave real consistency for some amazing young people. After a couple of years and various

changes in home circumstances that pattern wasn't working for me, and I joined the Trust work force appeal where they saw the benefit of youth workers in children's residential homes.

Currently I am working for The Fostering Network, working with carers and young people in foster care to improve their academic achievement. As I write this I am just home after spending 4 days on Ulster University Coleraine campus on a residential that enabled young people in foster care a university taster. They have maybe even inspired me to think about going back to studying!

Throughout my whole youth work journey it's the connections with young people that has kept me going. Brene Brown says "Connection gives purpose and meaning to our lives" and I am humbled and honoured to have connected over the past twenty something years with young people who have taught me daily about honesty, perseverance, loneliness, laughter, fear, love, hope, the importance of relationships.