Name: Liam Gill

What did you do prior to applying for the course?
I worked as a retail manager.

When did you do the course and what led you to apply?
I had joined a local autism support group called iCARE in 2005 and through a few years of volunteering in various committee positions, I took a keen interest in excursions and working with the young people who attended the service. I felt although I was doing community work, I didn't have the theory to back up my experience. I also had a strong interest in the rights of young people and, those who may live in marginalised communities and or vulnerable circumstances.I knew of Dr Breda Friel and the great work she was doing in the Inishowen Community through Insight Inishowen and contacted her through her University of Ulster email. I applied for the Certificate course and this started me on my educational journey. After successfully completing the Certificate with a Distinction, I applied for the Bachelor of Science in Community Youth work and was successful in securing a place.

Key milestones or memories from the programme

- Setting up Sonas Youth Club for young autistic people in October 2012 to coincide with the Certificate in Community Youth Studies. I got a lot of encouragement from my lecturer Alastair Scott-McKinley and my classmates in setting up the then new youth club, which is still going strong today. All the classmates who became great friends. We still keep in contact and it's great to be able to bounce ideas off other practitioners.
- For me, I really enjoyed the Reflective Practice. I was able to manage a centre for young people with autism and coordinate a youth club for autism, while studying at Magee with a strong emphasis on reflective practice, where I could critically analyze my own experiences, share them with a practice teacher and learn from them.
- And achieving a First-Class Honors degree in youth work was beyond satisfaction. It has opened up lots of new opportunities in securing meaningful employment. I was able to advance onto leadership roles in children's residential services and adult day services.

In general, with the professional development that both courses provided me, I was able to deepen my knowledge, expand my skills and stay up to date with the latest research and best practices in youth work.

Where are you now and what lies ahead for youth work?
I currently manage a day service for young adults with autism in Inishowen, Donegal and I have many hopes and plans for youth work in the future.

For youth work in Ireland, I would like to see a more increased focus on mental health - a greater emphasis on supporting and promoting mental health wellbeing. There could be more training for youth workers and more programmes on the topic.

With the advancement of technology and social media, more information, advice, and guidance as well as creating virtual spaces for learning and community-building.

These last few years, there has been some focus on inclusion and diversity, which has been beneficial to marginalised and disadvantaged youth. I feel more training, awareness and acceptance should be promoted and young people better informed. Efforts may be made to address issues such as gender equality, LGBTIQA+ inclusion and multiculturalism. More support and informal education for young people who identify as transgender or express themselves as non-human entities. Rural areas where young people are isolated and marginalized, and the shortage of funding for youth work overall.

With the aim of preparing young people for the transition into adulthood, there could be an increased focus on providing them with opportunities for skills development and enhancing their employability. Youth work initiatives could offer vocational training, entrepreneurship programs, work experience opportunities, and support for career planning. More focus on employability for autistic adults and more information for potential employers.

Youth work in Ireland could adopt more participatory approaches, encouraging young people to actively participate in shaping policies, programs, and services that directly impact them. More collaboration between youth work organisations, government agencies, schools, and other stakeholders will likely continue to be important. Sharing resources, expertise, and best practices can help create a more cohesive and coordinated approach to youth work in Ireland. Taking into consideration the effects of Brexit on youth work in Ireland in relation to funding and programmes, policy and regulation and the general impact.