

Name: Gail Neill

What did you do prior to applying for the course?

After leaving tech at 19 (where I did a medical secretarial course, of all things!) I went on to do a year-long programme with the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. This involved a group of us working in various church and community settings for blocks of 3 months, during which time we would support the development of children and youth based programmes. I was based in Monaghan, Doagh, Ballymoney and North Belfast. At the end of the year, I was offered a job as a youth worker in the church in Ballymoney that I had been based in. I worked in Ballymoney for a few years before moving to Garvagh, where I took up a post as a Community Development Officer for a local youth and community centre. I had great times in both settings but became aware that if I wanted to continue in youth work that some further professional training was required.

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

Aged 26 I applied for the BSc Community Youth Work at Jordanstown and was unsuccessful! I didn't hold that against them and applied again the following year. Going to university really was a big deal for me – firstly, it required me moving home (I'd been living on my own for 8 years) and more significantly, required me overcoming all the insecurities I had about not being 'academic' enough. Having gone to the local high school, university wasn't really promoted – we were still in an era of encouraging girls into secretarial roles and boys into trades. No-one in my family, at that point, had gone to university and to be honest, my parents thought it was a bit of a backward step as it meant I was leaving a full-time job and my own flat to move back home.

Key milestones or memories from the programme.

I graduated in 2004 with a 1st class honours degree, and for the girl who left school with 2 GCSEs, this was something very special. So special in fact that I think I brought half my family along to the Waterfront graduation! My mum still wasn't that clear regarding the importance of it all, mostly asking questions concerning if it meant that I'd now get a better or more permanent job. To which I, of course, had to answer no!

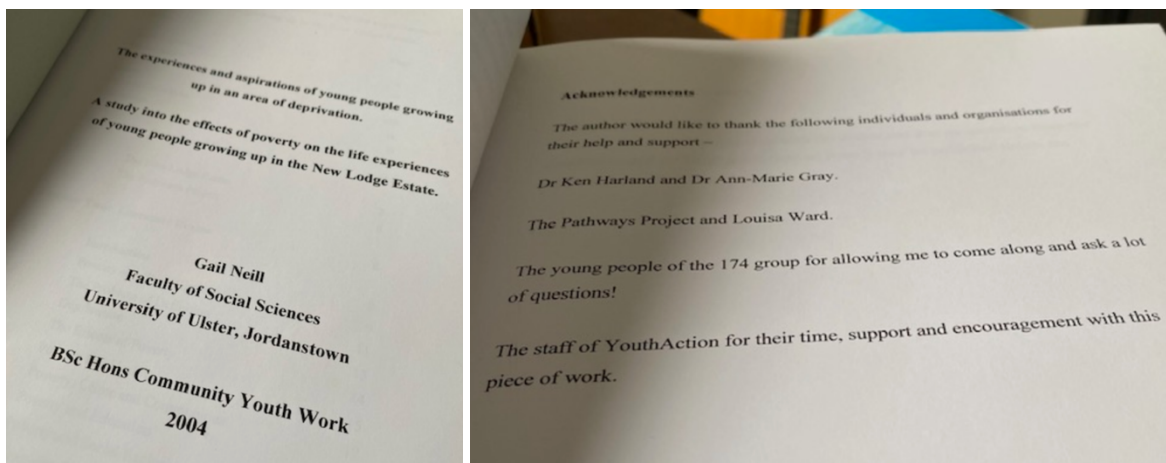
Just a couple of key memories –

- The labs – if you know, you know! What I thought was my 'I'm actively listening' face – was more like 'are you nearly finished' face!
- My first introduction to gender conscious work with Eliz and Susan. This was truly a light bulb moment for me and sharpened my awareness of power and privilege, the constraints of stereotypical gender roles and how this was experienced by young people.

- The placements I had during the course exposed me to different kinds of youth work and the practice teachers I was fortunate enough to have, offered me the time and challenge required to make sense of this.

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

Since 2017, I've had the privilege of returning to UU to teach on the Community Youth Work programme. It's a fantastic job that enables me to conduct research, engage with youth work students and see first-hand the innovative work that continues within the sector. There is no doubt that it is a tricky time for the sector - funding cuts, a lack of a local government, the ongoing impact of the pandemic and a cost of living crisis are just a few of the blows that have hit young people and the sector over the last few years. Despite these pressures (or perhaps because of them) it is reassuring to see organisations and individuals who remain committed to the value of open access youth work, who understand that relational youth work can be transformative and who continue to resist those programmes, funds or perspectives that problematise young people and instead problematise those systems that are failing young people. It is in these people and organisations that my hope for the future of youth work is grounded.



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