



Educating Claire, Educating Us

Claire Coffey is like any other 24-year-old student who has just graduated – excited and proud of her accomplishments.

Having been conferred with an honours Degree in English and History from Mary Immaculate College in Limerick city in October, and now embarking on a Masters Degree in History at the University of Limerick, Claire is justly satisfied with her achievements, particularly considering the many obstacles that she has faced along the way.

Claire, from Newport, Co. Tipperary, was diagnosed at 14 years of age with Asperger's syndrome – part of the range of autistic spectrum disorders – and what followed in the years ahead was a lengthy battle to secure her right to sit the Leaving Certificate and to pursue her education like any other person.

Having been denied the right to sit the State exams by two different schools, despite her clear abilities,



Pictured below: Claire Coffey on her graduation day with her proud mother Rita.

Claire and her mother Rita were faced with a long and stressful struggle to find a school which would accept her.

Claire believes that the reasons behind her early trouble in pursuing her dream stemmed from a lack of awareness about people with Asperger's. "You can't make a judgement on someone if you don't know them. I am a very determined person and I wanted to prove them wrong. This problem needs to be highlighted. People with Asperger's are more than capable of sitting the Leaving Certificate. I felt very offended at first but now I have my primary Degree and am pursuing a Masters. It feels good to show all those who doubted me that I could do it."

Claire has always had a strong academic leaning. "I really loved history ever since I was young. I need the structure of a learning environment and I adore being an academic. I realised shortly after I finished college that I wanted, and needed to be in, an

environment where I am learning. I enjoy studying and my dream is to be a lecturer someday."

In addition to her studies, Claire is a keen Taekwondo enthusiast, having achieved a blue belt quite recently after just two years of training. "I would highly recommend Taekwondo to anyone with Asperger's. When I was younger I had bad co-ordination, but my instructor was patient and my posture and balance have improved greatly; I couldn't be happier with it. My goal now is to get a black belt."

Rita, who works for RehabCare, is as proud as Punch of her daughter's achievements and the barriers that she has overcome in accessing mainstream education. "Her dream was to go to University and she has now achieved that, but people need to look at situations without judging. For people with Asperger's, it is hugely important that others try and see things from their perspective. People definitely need to have more awareness. To Claire, new situations are like living in a foreign country. It takes time."

Claire has now also set her sights on writing a book. "I want to write an autobiography about my experiences of living with Asperger's. I feel it would be of value to others out there and I want to debunk some of the myths about the condition which have made pursuing my education a lot harder than it should have been."

Claire has recently moved into a new home – her first time living independently and away from her family – and is receiving outreach support from RehabCare. It seems that for Claire, the future is bright and the only way is up! ■

