



Pictured left: Pupils and staff of Red Hill School in Patrickswell, Limerick.

Rehab's First Day at School

September 15th, 2008, was a historic day in the annals of Rehab as it opened the doors of Red Hill School, its new school for young people with autism in Patrickswell, serving the Limerick region.

I T WAS ALSO A PRETTY BIG DAY FOR SOME YOUNG people attending the school for the first time. Of course, it wasn't exactly their first-ever day at school for the majority of the pupils attending, as most of the initial intake had transferred from the Bluebell ABA school which closed in the summer of last year.

Initially located in Red House on Rehab's Red Hill site in Limerick, the school has since moved into temporary prefabricated accommodation, pending the development of a purpose-built state-of-the-art school.

The school has 15 pupils, with ages ranging from five to twelve years, and a staff complement currently of one principal, three teachers and eight special needs assistants.

So were there lots of tears on day one? "Yes, there were tears and that is to be expected where people are encountering new faces and new surroundings for the first time," says Bernie O'Connor, Red Hill School's principal. "Some of our new recruits were very happy and others were apprehensive. But we have a very experienced staff and pupils were made to feel welcome – indeed some of the staff had transferred from the Bluebell ABA school so that familiarity helped. When we started, we had a group of individuals; now everyone has settled in wonderfully and we are working together and playing together – we're a team."

Margie Norris is mum of Glenn Keating (age 8), one of the new pupils at the school. She said, "As Glenn had previously attended Red Hill for respite, he was very familiar with the surroundings and was extremely happy from the start. The teachers are known by their first names and that means that everything is already so much more friendly and personal. He has been doing really well, his social skills have improved and he has started doing something that he never used to do, and that is to come home and tell us what he has been doing in school."

"Glenn was in Bluebell previously and last year we had tried to transition him to a mainstream school. This saw him go from a situation of one-on-one tuition to a classroom size of 26. Despite everyone's best efforts, it just wasn't working out as Glenn had particular behaviour and emotional needs. My aim is that ultimately he will go back to a mainstream school and Red Hill is just the bridge that we need for that."

Bernie and her colleagues have been working hard to develop the school curriculum since the school opened. "We have spent a lot of time planning the curriculum and addressing matters such as autism and behaviour support management, policies and health and safety. We have put in place a programme of social outings for the pupils so that every week there is a visit to a shopping centre, a playground, a swimming pool, a library, an art gallery, or even a garden centre. It's all about helping our young people become more familiar with these external surroundings."

"We are also very pleased with the progress we have made with a local school in setting up an arrangement which we hope will see pupils going to that school to access physical education classes, art classes and social outings. We are also in the process of setting up 'My Gym' where

pupils participate in an eight-week programme of activity featuring physical exercise, healthy eating and hygiene, at the end of which they receive a certificate of participation."

Bernie is clear that the role of the school is more than just about meeting educational requirements. "Each young person has an individual education plan to nurture their all-round growth and development. The idea is to prepare them for living as independently as possible and to maximise the potential for love, happiness and fulfilment in their lives. I am immensely proud not only of the staff in the dedication and commitment that they have shown in getting the school up and running, but especially of our young people who inspire me every day with their achievements and insights."

Neil Tobin is interim School Manager of Red Hill School. He said the development of the school could not have been achieved without the vital involvement of others. "We have worked closely with the Department of Education and Science in establishing the school and this support has been invaluable. We are also very grateful to the Health Service Executive, Limerick County Council and to our colleagues in RehabCare in facilitating the use of Red House on an interim basis. I would also like to pay special thanks to our Rehab Group and National Learning Network colleagues who have given ongoing advice and assistance."

"Currently, we have 23 young people on a waiting list to get into the school, so we are hoping to be in a position to meet their needs, and indeed the needs of up to 60 pupils, once we have approval from the Department of Education and Science for the construction of a purpose-built school building."

Neil is keen to pay tribute to the parents of pupils attending the



Pictured above: Red Hill School pupil, Glenn Keating.

school. He says, "I have been involved in education for more years than I care to remember and I have rarely encountered as dedicated and as motivated a group of parents as here in Red Hill – they are simply amazing."

All of which bodes very well for the future. For more information on Red Hill School, see www.redhillschool.ie ■

Who to contact

For further information please contact:



Bernie O'Connor
Principal, Red Hill School
Patrickswell, Co. Limerick

Tel: 00353 61 215 760
Email: bernie.oconnor@redhillschool.ie