

TWO MOTHERS' STORIES

SEVERE TO PROFOUND HEARING IMPAIRMENT

Pamela McDermott is from Kilnavara in Co Cavan. Her son John (18) is categorised as having severe to profound hearing impairment. She tells us about how John's deafness was discovered and what has happened since then.

"His hearing impairment was discovered at his nine-month developmental check-up in the UK. I hadn't suspected anything, because he was saying 'mama' and 'dada', but when the nurse shook the rattle behind John, he didn't respond."

A visiting teacher came each week to help John – and his mother – and Pamela also taught programmes sent from the John Tracey Clinic in Los Angeles helpful when John was very young.

"He is actor Spencer Tracey's son. He was born deaf and set up a special school to help people. One of the things I learned was to sit on my hands when I am talking, so I didn't cover my mouth and John could learn to lip read."

After the family moved back to Cavan in 1994, John and his mother spent three weeks at the clinic in the US, thanks to local fundraising. "He had intensive speech therapy, and within a week he turned round and said: "Love you, Mum." It was a wonderful moment."

Pamela feels that she's had to fight for supports; for example, a medical card, speech therapy and necessities like a special smoke alarm for John that will vibrate under the bed to wake him in the event of fire.

John went to several primary schools, with some being more supportive than others, but secondary school was too big a step for him.

"By second year, John felt he wasn't able for it. He'd been going to summer camps in St Joseph's School for the Deaf in Cabra and had made friends there. He said himself that he wanted to go to secondary school there as a boarder. I didn't want him to go, but I felt comfortable with the school when we visited, and John was familiar with the boarders' carers from being at the summer camps."

John is now doing his Leaving Cert and can speak and sign as well. "He talks about going to college in the future, maybe to do teaching or something with computers," says Pamela.

DIAGNOSED AT 18 MONTHS OLD (PICTURED LEFT)

Marie Madden's daughter Avril (19) was diagnosed when she was 18 months old and had a cochlear implant when she was 15. She is now studying for her Leaving Cert and is planning a career as a chocolatier. Her mother Marie, from Naas, thinks there aren't enough supports for the deaf – or their parents – in this country.

"It was like floundering around in the dark trying to get help. There was always this sense of us, and Avril, being in two worlds: in the hearing world and the deaf world. Avril is oral, but she also signs, so she is in two worlds. There is this sense of not being fully accepted by the deaf world nor by the hearing world – that has even been said to her."

Marie recognised that Avril had hearing problems when she was 18 months old. "The sounds she was making weren't right. Initially, I put it down to her grieving the death of her older sister, Colette, from a congenital defect, but as time went on I knew something was wrong and had her checked out."

While speech therapy was "piecemeal" and there wasn't enough home support, the Maddens are thankful for the cochlear implant provided by the HSE through the Beaumont medical team.

"Avril went to St Mary's School for the Deaf when she was 11, as she was struggling in our local school," Marie says. "After visiting St Mary's, I felt it was right for Avril. It wasn't all plain-sailing, though. She had no sign language, so she couldn't communicate with her class initially, and she felt different to the others, but home tuition helped her learn."

"The cochlear implant has meant a big improvement in her hearing. The night I drove her home after she was 'switched on' she asked what's that noise? It was the wipers on the car. That was amazing for me. It was a sound we all took for granted, but she had never heard it before," says Marie.

OFFICIALLY SPEAKING

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONS AND SKILLS

"There are three special schools and 10 special classes attached to mainstream schools for children with hearing impairment," the Department says.

"The special classes have a pupil-teacher ratio of 7:1. There is an enhanced subvention and grant aid towards special equipment. There is a weekly home tuition service for deaf pre-school children and deaf school-going pupils to provide training in Irish sign language for these children, their parents and siblings." See www.education.ie for more information.



BEEKEEPING

Supporting families

There are striking similarities between the Kikandwa organisation in Uganda and Ireland's Congested Districts Board, writes Willie O'Byrne.

The establishment, in Ireland, of the Congested Districts Board in 1891 has similarities with a programme set up by the Kikandwa Rural Communities Development Organisation.

Kikandwa is located in the Mukondo district of Uganda. This organisation is registered as a non-governmental organisation (NGO) and was born out of a need by rural people to earn an income.

The Congested Districts Board (CDB) established schemes in many Irish counties, which improved the livelihoods of those living in them. Many cottage industries were established, one of which was beekeeping.

The CDB designed a beehive suited to Irish conditions, which they supplied under government grant schemes. Beekeepers procured hives and bees and paid for them on an installment basis.

Under the CDB, training for beekeepers and instructors took place. The excess honey produced was sold through Sir Thomas Lipton by arrangement.

There are many similarities between the CDB and the Kikandwa Organisation. The Kikandwa Organisation's aim is to empower and support rural communities, with beekeeping as one of the projects established. People are trained to give instruction, make hives and other beekeeping equipment. The sale of surplus honey, wax and other hive products provide an income for families.

Beekeeping is very much encouraged as an alternative to charcoal making as a means of earning a living. The making of charcoal is dis-

couraged due to its impact on the environment. Its replacement with beekeeping will greatly improve local flora and crop yields due to the excellent ability of the honeybee as a pollinator.

Some of the new beekeeping projects in Kikandwa have been documented in photos by Lar Boland, who took his camera to Kikandwa. Lar went out there under the Simon Cumbers Media Challenge Fund – 2009. Taking a camera into close proximity with bees, whose temperament was unknown to Lar – not to mention the lack of protective

clothing – shows dedication to the task.

I have seen some of the photos of beekeeping in Kikandwa, and I was struck by one particular photo taken by Lar, which showed a local beekeeper holding a queen in readiness for clipping her wings (*pictured top*).

Wing clipping is practiced by beekeepers to prevent the loss of a queen with a swarm and is done using small scissors. However, in this photo the beekeeper is actually placing the queen's wings in his mouth and biting off part of her wings. Naturally, his hand was also covered with bees, which were attracted to the queen's location.

Beekeeping is normally done using top-bar hives, but the project encourages the use of other modern types which produce more honey and are easier managed. **CL**



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