'Are You Mental?

Celebrating Mental Health

Dara Duffy

A NEW VIDEO by participants in the New Voyages programme at the National Learning Network in Carrick-on-Shannon is breaking down barriers and offering a fresh insight into the area of mental illness.

The National Learning Network (formerly NTDI) has been providing quality vocational training and employment opportunities for people with additional support needs for over 50 years and has been in Leitrim since August 2002 with the *'New Voyages'* rehabilitative training programme.

Filmed in July 2004 and funded by the North Western Health Board, the video, 'Are You Mental? Celebrating Mental Health' offers reflections on mental health issues from the personal perspective of five participants in the New Voyages programme. This video was officially launched last January by Eurovision winner, Charlie McGettigan, at a special screening and reception in the Leitrim Mobile Cinema in Carrick-on-Shannon.

"We decided to make the video to tell everyone what we had been through in life and that we lived to tell the tale. There's nobody better able to make a video on mental health than the people who have experienced it" says New Voyages participant Tom Beirne.

In the video, the participants recount their experiences of mental illness with great honesty and courage.

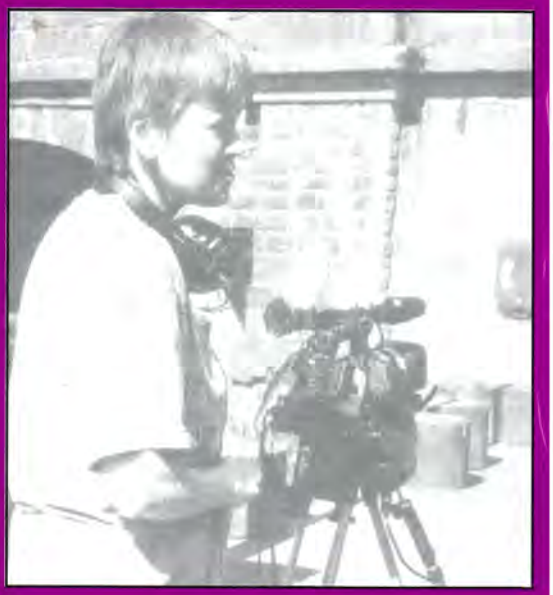
"Mental illness is a living hell" says Edward Leacy. "You can't see it, there's no cure for it. At the end of the day you have to fight for it yourself"

Living with a mental illness, can be a lonely and confusing experience. "Nobody has any sympathy with mental illness" says Tom Beirne. "It's inside the head and no one sees it, it's not physical. It's different if you break your arms or your legs."

"It's hard to understand your mind at the time when you're ill. It stops you from doing the things that you'd like to do," says Tom Brennan. "It was very difficult for me, and for my family. I didn't understand the ins and outs of mental health, what it was about, and what I was going through. Other people didn't understand why I had gone off the face of the earth for a couple of years."

"The reason we made the video is to give people more of an understanding and insight into mental health. It's not the end of the world if you have a mental health problem. You learn more about yourself and about others who suffer. It's the beginning of a great new life. Hopefully this video will show people that you can get help and become happy again."

All of those who took part in the video were agreed on the positive impact that the New Voyages programme has had on their lives.

The contributors to the video were in Dublin in mid-April to make a presentation at the National Learning Network Student Representative Council's first annual seminar: 'Creating Inclusion Through Advocacy'. The group have also facilitated workshops and made presentations to a number of community groups in Leitrim and surrounding counties.

Above: After successfully shooting the video—Pascal McTiernan, Nora Mitchell, Edward Leacy, Tom Brennan & Tom Beirne.
Middle: Lis Valles & Nora Mitchell working hard on the production.
Bottom: Maria Gibbons who worked on the camera work and editing.