A LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

Fiona Woods

THERE ARE many more opportunities for our young people nowadays; both in this country and abroad in all areas of life than there ever were before. These opportunities are clearly visible in the areas of education, employment and in society in general and are available to all young people in this country who can choose to take advantage of them or let them go by without seizing them.

Concentrating on education firstly, the increase in opportunities is very evident. Years ago, many teenagers left school before completing their Leaving Certificate Examination, and the majority of those who did stay on looked for a job directly afterwards. There wasn't much need for career guidance councillors back then! The main question secondary school students were being asked in those days was whether or not they would be continuing their education by going to a Third Level Institution of Education and the answer was usually no. Nowadays, with the changing of time, the question they are being asked is not if they will be going to a Third Level Institute of Education or not, but rather which one they intend on attending. How times have changed!

You may wonder why or how these changes have come about and the reason is simple. Changes in society and in the attitudes of certain groups of people have resulted in more opportunities becoming available to students today. With the choice of Colleges, Universities, Institutes of Technology and Fás courses that are available nowadays, the needs and wants of all young people are catered for. From Queen's University in Belfast and Letterkenny Institute of Technology to University College Cork; the National University of Ireland in Galway to Dublin City University and everywhere in between, courses is being offered in everything imaginable from Astronomy to Zoology.

However, if like hundreds of Irish students each year you don't get the required amount of points to be offered a place on your chosen course here; if you'd prefer a course that's on offer abroad or if you simply just feel like you would rather study outside Ireland for whatever reason you might have, you can always travel to England, Scotland or Wales to continue your study. Many students cross the pond each year to take up places in college right across Britain where all courses, especially medicine, are more realistically accessible than they are here.

As a result of the choices which are available to students nowadays, more and more students are deciding that further education is the way forward and, like a chain reaction, even more opportunities are becoming available to future generations because of the interest and demand shown for them from this generation. While the increase in opportunities is clearly evident in the academic section of post-Leaving Cert life, it is also visible in the recreational aspect. All colleges have numerous clubs and societies which will compete for the attention of students to join (some will even go as far as to lure you in by giving out free sweets!). By joining these clubs and societies, you have the opportunity to continue practicing an old hobby or start something completely new and exciting (I strongly recommend snowboarding) that will act as an opportunity to meet new people and take your mind off lectures – although I have to say that it's not advisable to forget about them completely.

However, this is not to say that if you don't do your Leaving Cert and/or go to college there are no opportunities out there for you. Not everyone wants, or is able, to spend hours with their heads stuck in books studying. God knows (and I think my mother has realised now too) that study and I don't belong in the same sentence. So for teenagers who aren't destined to become the modern-day Albert Einstein, the world of work seems like a far more appetising prospect which is unsurprising when doors are being opened to them in all areas, and in this money-obsessed world of ours, a

regular income is always a nice thing to have. Whether students wish to work here in Ireland or go abroad, there has never been a better time to be a teenager seeking work. Some would argue that in a time when the Celtic Tiger is only a faint and distant memory, the Irish economy isn't firing on all cylinders. However, this is not the case. Unemployment is at an all-time low. 95% of the entire Irish population is employed, which leaves a mere 5% out of work, the majority of which are stay-at-home parents, children who are too young to work and retired or elderly people.

Thousands of Irish youths flock to foreign countries each year to have fun in the sun while taking advantage of the lucrative seasonal work available during the summer months. Some travel to France or Spain but without doubt the most popular destination for Irish teenagers each year has to be America. Irish youngsters with and without work visas leave our shores each year swapping the dull, dreary, depressing Irish weather for something slightly warmer to get some well-earned money by working on building sites and in numerous other professions, and who can blame them? The opportunities are there for them, they would be wrong not to avail of them.

Opportunities are not just confined to the areas of education and employment, however. They also exist in everyday life in society in general and especially in areas such as sport. There has never been more emphasis on recreation and exercise than there is today. With more and more health problems such as obesity and cardiovascular ailments of all sorts being discovered each day, we are all being advised to eat healthier and exercise more often. This is the perfect excuse for us all to practice our favourite sport, whether it involves kicking a football around a field or going for a swim, and luckily for us, if we want to take our sports seriously instead of just having them as pastimes, now is the time to do it. There is now excellent backing from numerous organisations throughout the country that have the sole aim of encouraging and fostering young talent so that they can perform to the best of their ability. Whether you want to compete at club, county, provincial, national or international level, there is tremendous support and backing in place in many sports to allow you to do so. Most of this support was not in place up until a few years ago so we are the first generation to experience it and therefore we should grab hold of the opportunities created as a result of it so as to ensure it will stay in place for future generations.

We can therefore see that in today's world there are numerous opportunities for young people in this country in comparison with those that were available for our counterparts in past generations. These opportunities are readily available for us and it is up to us to decide whether or not, or in what way, we want to take advantage of them. I would advise everyone to grab hold of any opportunity, or even half opportunity that presents itself because it will only come around once and you will regret it in future years if you don't seize them now.

Carole Coleman signing a copy of her book: 'Alleluia America! An Irish Journalist in Bush Country' at the launch in Carrick-on-Shannon

PHOTO: WILLIE DONNELLAN

Alleluia America!

Leitrim journalist and former RTÉ Washington correspondent Carole Coleman has recently launched her book – *Alleluia America*! An Irish Journalist in Bush Country. Carole got world wide publicity in 2004, when in an interview with US President George Bush, she confronted him and asked the hard questions that were on everyone's lips. He was expecting an Irish colleen to do the interview but he got more than he bargained for. It may not have pleased the most powerful man in the world but it showed her to be a courageous journalist. The interview is well documented in the book as is many other intriguing stories of life, close to the corridors of power. It gives a good insight into how the American system and style of Government operates. Carole launched the book in her mother, Kathleen's Bookshop in Carrick-on-Shannon.