

Seamless move to jazz music

MICHELLE McDONAGH

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NEW LIFE : Tom Mulcahy juggles tutoring and his studies for an MA in jazz performance with his full-time tailoring job at Tucker Tailors

TOM MULCAHY finds it difficult to put into words the impact that being diagnosed with dyslexia had on him after a lifetime of failing exams and feeling inadequate.

"Understanding that I wasn't stupid and that I just learned differently was a long journey that required a lot of reflection, perseverance and hard work. I learned that 'one size doesn't fit all' and just the label of dyslexia is not enough to help a struggling learner," he remarks.

Despite having nothing but painful memories of his own school days, these days, Mulcahy is never happier than when he is in class.

The big difference is, that instead of sitting at the back of the class where he was ignored as a child with dyslexia, Mulcahy is now at the top of the class tutoring young musicians at University College Cork.

He combines this work and his studies for his MA in jazz performance with his full-time tailoring job at Tucker Tailors on Washington Street in Cork (Tommy Tucker being the musician's nickname).

It is his passion for music, and for jazz in particular, that has kept Mulcahy going through the many obstacles he faced during his studies for a BA in jazz performance.

It wasn't until 10 years ago that Mulcahy was finally diagnosed with the condition dyslexia when he went for an assessment at the Limerick Dyslexic Support Centre. After the nightmare of his school days, the diagnosis came as an enormous relief.

The Dyslexia Association of Ireland suggests a very simple definition of dyslexia is that it is a "specific learning difficulty which makes it hard for some people to learn to read, write and spell correctly".

He says: "Everybody thought I was stupid in school. My older siblings were clever and they did well in class, but I was regarded as being lazy. There was no help from the teachers in those days. Instead of being ready for the world leaving school, I was the total opposite."

After leaving school early, Mulcahy went into the family tailoring business in Tipperary before moving to Cork where he set up his own business. He has always loved music and was a trad musician, but it was during his time in Philadelphia in his 20s that he went to see jazz legend Chuck Mangione play and from that night he was hooked on jazz music.

Mulcahy has problems reading (especially music), spelling, writing, sequencing, processing information and short-term memory due to his dyslexia. His own two adult children are dyslexic, but are also gifted musicians and singers.

Now in the second year of his MA at UCC, Mulcahy is still teaching part-time in the Department of

Music at the university where he also tutors jazz ensemble students.

He works six days a week but is happy to do so as his life is now "busy but full".

"I'm still working full-time in the shop. It took a long time but I've learnt how to balance the two. I realise I'm very lucky because my MA work involves lots of listening to music which I can do while I'm tailoring. I'm quite dedicated when it comes to study because I have to be, I study every lunch hour and in the afternoon."

While he is able to combine teaching and tailoring at the moment, Mulcahy admits that if the "right opportunity" came along, he would probably give up the tailoring.

Over the past 10 years, Mulcahy has learnt a lot about his condition and as a teacher, his hope is to be able to help students achieve their goal in music, whether they have dyslexia or not. He says the support of his wife and children was vital in helping him to overcome the many obstacles he has faced.

He has devised his own ingenious methods of using such modern technologies as slow speed transcribers, digital dictaphones, computers and iPods to his advantage in his studies and he advises others with dyslexia to do the same.

He comments: "Once I began to understand how I learned and once I took responsibility for my learning, I began to make progress in my studies. I think one thing I learned from taking responsibility is that learning has to be personally meaningful.

"I could not have accomplished what I have without having a passion for music and a strong commitment to my goals. As a student, I have had to embrace struggle as a necessary part of my growth."

In teaching children with dyslexia, Mulcahy believes the best approach is to focus on their strengths rather than on what they cannot do. The more a teacher experiments with different methods on a student with dyslexia, the better chance they have of finding the way that helps the student best, he explains.

"Think of the brain as a large filing cabinet. When it works well, a person knows where to retrieve information. Many people with dyslexia go to the filing cabinet and look for the information only to find that they have forgotten where they stored it."

• *For further information about dyslexia and the support available in Ireland, contact the Dyslexia Association of Ireland at www.dyslexia.ie or tel (01) 6790276*

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