

**University of Limerick Regional Writing Competition 2015**

***Topic: The Role of Young People in Ireland.***

I read the name Malala Yousafzai over and over. Suddenly, my mind enters a time tunnel and I am immediately forced to reflect on the moments of October 09th 2012. My senses go into absolute overdrive as I hear the loud, spine shrivelling sounds of a shotgun and I smell the stench of blood that is circulating the north west Pakistani town of Swat Valley. Malala; a fresh faced, dark eyed girl who didn't want to be surrounded by the four walls of a lonely, rat infested home or spend countless hours preparing meals for an abusive husband she was forced to marry. She wanted to use her knowledgeable brain to the best of her ability and not be controlled by a group of terrorists who would try their hardest to prevent girls from receiving an education. After writing a blog promoting education for girls, Malala came to the attention of the oppressive, intolerant and domineering Taliban group. Despite being shot three times with blasting bullets, Malala's sheer determination never faded away and her scars and blood were soon replaced by a glittering glow. This glow is what carried her into a brighter future as Malala was given the opportunity to speak at the headquarters of the United Nations to call for worldwide access to education as well as becoming the youngest ever Nobel Prize laureate. To think that a girl could achieve so much at such a young age startled me and led me to considerations closer to home as I began to think about the young population of Irish society today and how they too can contribute to improving their own situations.

The first individual who immediately springs to my mind is Donal Walsh. Donal, a determined Kerry man who craved perfection in all he tried, was diagnosed with cancer when he was twelve years old. Despite being given a prosthetic knee, Donal overcame his illness and returned to his local rugby club Tralee RFC as a coach. He became a heroic figure for many as he overcame the obstacles which were presented to him and became a person of great comfort and encouragement. When the cancer returned to his lung, Donal was determined to tackle the tumours in his body with all fires blazing but sadly in late 2012, he was diagnosed with further tumours in five places. Despite being told he only had a few months left to savour up the bright lights of life, Donal lived each day to the fullest and was extremely motivated to raise funds for other people who were battling the poisonous omen in their body. Donal raised over 65,000 euro for Our Lady's Hospital for Sick Children, Crumlin, as well as promoting suicide awareness across the country. Such intelligence and passion from a boy of such a young age attracted national attention and his "Suicide Plea" article was published in major national tabloids such as the Sunday Independent. He also appeared on "The Saturday Night Show" with host Brendan O'Connor where he represented the youth of Ireland tremendously well as he discussed the importance of health and how more actions and support services must be put in place in order to combat suicide. Although Donal passed away in May of 2013, his legacy can still be felt by almost every heart in the country and through his sheer power and actions, a number of mental health services and suicide prevention fundraising events are now in place across the country.

Although I thought this essay would be extremely difficult to write, after thinking of all the work Malala has done for her country, I have realised that there are a number of heroic young figures in Irish society. Take Joanne O' Riordan as another example. Joanne, who hails from Millstreet, Co. Cork, is one of seven living people born with the condition Tetra-Amelia syndrome, meaning she has no limbs. Highly unimpressed by Kenny's decision in the General Election to cut disability funding, Joanne angrily wrote a letter to Enda Kenny and explained why disability funding is essential in order

to make her life the best it can be. Due to Joanne's sheer uniqueness, the government changed its mind and decided to provide the funding that people with disabilities so desperately need in order to have the highest standard quality of equipment and treatment. Joanne was invited to speak before the United Nations in New York City, giving an address on the use of technology and challenging those present to build a robot for her to use. Joanne was also named "Young Person of the Year" at the "People of the Year Awards" in September of 2012 due to her absolute courage and high volume of resoluteness, which she has flowing through her body like oxygen. O' Riordan, a refreshing example of determination and optimism, has made a massive impact on healthcare and technology both at home and abroad in order to try and improve her own standard of living as well as improving the way of life for many other people.

As I am reflecting on the role that young Irish people play in society today, I begin to feel slightly angered. Despite many people's efforts, there are always going to be those negative attitudes floating around society that believe that young people are worthless and occupy their spare time by taking drugs and drinking excessive amounts of alcohol. Although not everyone in society has a bright golden halo on top of their angelic heads, this does not mean that they are not capable of achieving goodness in other people's lives. I think of Katy French. A stunning and driven supermodel and television personality who studied psychology and marketing before embarking on her career as a model with Assets Modelling Agency. Katy is remembered by many people as being "that blonde haired bombshell who drugged her way to death". Many media outlets are quite critical towards her, portraying her as a rather self-centred individual who did nothing for humanity but pose nude for top selling magazines. In reality, Katy was a kind hearted charity worker who spent countless hours working for several Irish charities including Our Lady's Children's Hospital, Crumlin, as well as travelling out to Calcutta, India, to work with charity organisation GOAL in order to improve the lives of other people living in disadvantaged areas. Perhaps it was just a smile she put on a malnourished child's sunken face or maybe it was just a bottle of water she provided for a pregnant woman who was exasperating with sweat in a shanty town. Whatever she did, her aim was to fulfil her own life by improving the life of others.

As a Garda Youth Achievement recipient myself, I feel that it is essential we continue to praise the voluntary work and contributions that young people make to Irish society in order to continue its success. By acknowledging the tremendous tasks and kind hearts of young people, our future generation will feel more encouraged to speak their own opinions as well as getting involved in voluntary organisations and charity work. "We realize the importance of our voices only when we are silenced." This is a quote from Malala Yousafzai. Although she is talking about women's rights to education, I really feel this quote can be applied to the role that young Irish people play in society today. Without a voice, the potential of young people is curtailed. Without belief in our young people's talents, their true potential will be exploited abroad rather than at home, and without our young people, there can only be a future of silence.