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Katriona O’Sullivan

I sat drinking in the knowledge, and for the first time in my life I felt alive

She is actually speaking to ME... in Latin! As I stand in front of Mary Robinson, one of the few Irish presidents I actually know of and admire, it finally feels like I belong.

Trinity College¹ is finally acknowledging me.

5 After nine years of hard study, loneliness, sadness and immense joy, I’m part of this place. I turn around with my PhD² certificate and see my beautiful boy Sean and Dave, his dad, looking on with pride. Sean really has no clue what this all means but he smiles anyhow.

I have to start my Trinity tale at the end. If I started at the beginning you’d probably have stopped reading. You may have thought you’d picked up a copy of *Take a Break* or *Woman’s Way*³ by mistake. I am not your usual TCD⁴ graduate.

10 There are no doctors, lawyers or graduates in my recent family... Katriona O’Sullivan PhD wouldn’t have really fitted on my social welfare card or my lone parent’s benefit book⁵.

15 I’m what is commonly known as an “access” student; I come from an “under-represented student group”. I am a charity case, an experiment. I am one of the students that was allowed in because someone fought hard against the elite education system that believes intelligence is measured by school performance. Someone recognised that people like me also had the potential to be people like you.

I grew up in a family that most people would consider “disadvantaged”. My parents were heroin addicts, my dad spent a lot of time in prison, and I had little or no support from within or outside my family home. I watched my mam⁶ inject drugs and helped her smuggle drugs into my dad in jail. I was a child that you would have pitied; the child that is talked about in shocking newspaper stories.

20 Despite my family drama, and the regular hunger pains, I was bright and vivacious. I loved school, I loved to learn, I read avidly. I was excellent at all sports and was, and still am, extremely determined. But when you live in a family that does not aspire to much, and you are surrounded by people who cannot see past your disadvantage, it’s really hard to dream big. I knew no one who went to university or college and dreamed of

¹ *Trinity College*: university in Dublin

² the highest possible academic degree a student can obtain

³ *Take a Break* or *Woman’s Way*: lifestyle magazines

⁴ Trinity College Dublin

⁵ *lone parent’s benefit book*: financial aid for single parents

⁶ mother

25 being somewhere else or someone else. I didn't dream of a university education or travelling the world – my dreams only stretched as far as being on TV or becoming a pop star.

30 In secondary school, my life began to spiral. It became more and more difficult for me to get up, to respond appropriately, to smile or to even try. I could no longer ignore the loneliness I felt and when I hit 15, I fulfilled the destiny my upbringing offered and became pregnant. The shame of becoming a “gym slip mum”⁷ meant I could not face school and left. When I was six months pregnant I was asked to leave my family home and ended up homeless. We squatted⁸ in flats and eventually I ended up in a homeless hostel for young mothers where my son was born. I tried to focus on him, getting my welfare payments, securing a corporation house⁹ and being like every other girl in my situation. I worked hard at being the best I could be, and made do.

35 Fast forward seven years and I had achieved my all-time goal; I was a lone parent, I lived in a government-assisted flat in Dublin 1¹⁰, and I was getting my social welfare. My child was doing his best and so was I. I had a cash-in-hand job cleaning Connolly station. I woke at 6am every morning leaving my son John in bed while I walked to the station and cleaned the dirtiest office you have ever seen in your life. I had it all. But still, I couldn't shake the feeling of “is this really it?” [...]

40 I applied to the Trinity Access Programmes (TAP) on a whim. My friend Karen had told me she was studying law in Trinity College and, like me, she had kids and was on her own. She struggled like me and more importantly, she spoke like me. When she said she'd gotten into this big posh college through TAP I was excited and envious. I didn't think you were allowed in through the main gates. The only people I knew who went in there were going to rob bikes. Now here I was, sitting in front of three people, trying to convince them to let me into a programme that would help me become something I wasn't sure I even wanted to be.

45 When the letter arrived offering a place on the access programme my dad got it framed. I felt happy, sad, scared and hopeful. But who would help me, who would look after my son? My friends were supportive and one of them told me about the Vinnies (St Vincent DePaul) – a group who could help people like me. I called the number, trying to explain without sounding desperate. They came over and were kind. A little posh, but they seemed genuine.

50 I felt ashamed but they didn't seem to judge me. They reminded me of the teachers who reached out to me when I was younger, or the kind lady in our local shop who would give me food because she knew I was hungry. They told me to relax, that they would help. They paid for my childcare.

55 The first day of TAP was strange. I had brought my new notepad, pens and a few highlighters like a good student. We were located in Goldsmith Hall at the back of campus – you didn't even have to go through the main gates to get there. I met the other students, we were all so diverse. I was the youngest mature student at 23, there was even a woman aged 60 on the course. We were all so different yet there was a camaraderie there, a sense of belonging. [...]

Irena, the course director, liked me, I could tell. She kept checking on me and smiling when I looked her way – she made me feel at home. We started TAP by doing taster classes – two weeks to decide whether you wanted to be a science, social science or arts student. I knew I loved books so English seemed like a given. Biology,

⁷ *gym slip mum*: a teenager who becomes a mother while still in school

⁸ to live in a building without the owner's permission

⁹ affordable housing

¹⁰ *Dublin 1*: a postcode in central Dublin

60 physics, chemistry, philosophy, psychology – I loved everything. I sat drinking in the knowledge and, for the first time in my life, I felt alive. I mean, really alive.

Everything I was learning felt so new and exciting. I remember sitting in the psychology class with Professor Ray Fuller thinking this guy is amazing. He talked about his family while showing us examples of behaviourism and I was hooked. I decided to focus on English, Philosophy, Psychology and Law as my four subjects. [...]

65 The April before my TAP exams I received the offer of a degree place in Trinity. I was lucky enough to be offered my first three choices: psychology, philosophy and BESS¹¹. I just needed to pass my exams to progress. But I wobbled and decided I couldn't do it, that it was too much. I didn't belong and so I stopped attending. I was used to failing or feeling bad.

70 So feeling good and hopeful wasn't easy to accept – self sabotage was normal for many like me. This is where TAP came to the rescue. Irena literally dragged me by the scruff of the neck into my exams – she made me see the worth I had and the life I could have. Without it, I would not be here today.

Without the opportunity to breathe in knowledge, to step slowly into this beautiful place, I would have never been able to succeed. It was the secure base from which I was able to navigate my educational path.

75 “Now you all know the equation of the line so I won't go over this for you”. My first lecture as an undergrad in Trinity Psychology was statistics. I am sure I will fail. I don't know the equation of the line. I didn't even finish my secondary schooling let alone memorise the equation of a line. Sh*t, I shouldn't have come here.

As I look around this feeling mounts. They all look so confident. They dress weird too, like they have money but no money. Messy clothes that are designer brands. I have on fake tan and a hun-bun¹². I don't belong here.

80 Those first few months in Trinity proper were hard. I felt lost, the psychology class was small which meant I couldn't hide. I was sitting with middle-class kids who had got around 580 points in their Leaving Cert¹³ and I felt like a failure. Two years before I started my degree I had been working as the dinner lady in the Institute of Education. [...]

85 I spent a good proportion of my time as a Trinity undergraduate rotating between feeling ashamed of my past and proud of myself for being there. I never asked for an extension¹⁴ in my four years, I never missed a deadline or an exam. I passed everything I sat – even in second year when I gave birth to my second son in February, I sat my exams in May. I was determined, resilient and driven.

I learned so much from my degree. I learned about how a child develops, about the power of attachment and love. I learned how to think critically and how to be a better student. [...]

90 By the end of third year I had found my feet. While I would never fully belong in TCD I knew by then I was good enough. I got to know all the catering staff, all the cleaners and all the builders during my nine years as a student and three years as staff. These were and still are my people. As a research student, I began to flourish

¹¹ bachelor in economic and social studies

¹² hairstyle

¹³ 580 points in their Leaving Cert: a good result in their final exams

¹⁴ extra time for working on a paper

and by the end of third year I was achieving high 2.1s¹⁵ for all my work and felt confident I would pass my degree.

95 “The results will be posted online in June, if you guys are thinking about using this degree for anything decent in the future a 2.1 or above is your only hope.” I put my head down and work harder than I have worked before. If I fail at this I am f**ked, all of this will have been for nothing.

100 I’ll never forget the day the results were posted on that noticeboard. It ran in the order of grades so you could see who got firsts, 2.1s etc. I remember standing in the small reception area of the first floor of Áras an Phiarsaigh¹⁶ absolutely terrified. When I got to the board I started from the bottom running my finger up the sheet. I wasn’t in the fails, phew. I wasn’t in the 2.2s-yeah! I looked at the 2.1s expecting to see my number but it wasn’t there. Then I saw my student number listed in the first class honour section¹⁷ and let out a massive scream. I was like “yes, f**king yes”, I couldn’t hold it in.

105 I told everyone, I was like a child. I knew it wasn’t very humble but I had worked my ass off to get there and I felt so proud of myself and my family. I was offered a PhD studentship that summer and began my PhD studies in the TCD psychology department pretty much straight away.

Once you get into TCD you often don’t want to leave. It is so beautiful and calm. But I didn’t stay for the beauty, I stayed because it was the first place I actually realised my worth as a person, as a woman. It gave me an insight into my capabilities. It made me see the potential for my life and my family’s life.

(2021)

¹⁵ a very good result at university in Ireland

¹⁶ *Áras an Phiarsaigh*: building at Trinity College

¹⁷ *first class honour section*: an excellent result at university in Ireland