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Dr Helen McGuirk, Director of The Hinks Centre at CIT

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“In an age of lifelong learning, education is for anyone at any age.”

Dr Helen McGuirk is the Director of The Hinks Centre at CIT. She spoke to MARY ROSE MCCARTHY about a second chance at education, the silver economy, and lifelong learning

DUBLIN-born Helen McGuirk, who now lives in Clonakilty and works as Director of the Hincks Centre at CIT, has had a varied life in different corners of the country – and the world.

Her parents, also Dublin born, went in search of an adventure. They were appointed wardens of the An Oige Hostel on Cape Clear island, off the West Cork coast. Since then, Helen has maintained a lifelong affinity with the island. She attended primary school there and said it was a wonderful education through Irish in which she is still fluent.

Her parents' wanderlust brought the family back to Dublin, where Helen attended secondary school. After that, she did a secretarial course which she said in those days the majority of her classmates also undertook.

“Only the very few went on to university,” she says.

“For some, even getting a Leaving Certificate wasn’t the norm. The course was the best thing I ever did.

“Having touch typing and shorthand has come in useful on many occasions.”

Once again, the wanderlust bug bit and her parents with their five children upped sticks and moved to Australia. They had no home or employment.

“We lived in a migrant centre for two weeks,” Helen says. “It felt like a lifetime.”

Within two weeks, their father, Helen and two other sisters all had found employment. The family also secured housing. Helen worked as a secretary for a timber company.

Perth is a very quiet city and after a year, Helen longed for more excitement. She took a 53 hour journey by bus across Australia to Sydney. There she stayed in a hostel and eventually secured employment with Macquari Bank.

All the while, Helen believed that to progress she needed to do a degree, probably in business. The company did offer her scholarships to pursue a degree but Helen didn’t want to be tied down and thought she might travel again.



Dr Helen McGuirk, The Hincks Centre speaking at the Silver SMEs project Conference in the Hincks Centre, CIT.

Picture: Darragh Kane

After three years in Sydney, Helen did just that, taking the 'scenic route' from Australia back to Ireland. She spent the summer in Cape Clear where she met and fell in love with Patrick. But she moved back to Dublin and opened a café in the inner city. She ran this for three years while carrying on a long distance relationship with the man she met back in Cork. Eventually they decided to marry and settle on Cape Clear.

"In my innocence," Helen says "I thought a winter wedding in Clonakilty would be very romantic. The weather had other ideas which meant Patrick and his family couldn't get off Cape. Search and rescue helicopter came to the rescue."

A picture of the rescue made the front page of the *Examiner*.

"About four years ago," Helen says "the Examiner published it again as part of memories down the years. Until then my colleagues in CIT didn't know about the adventure of getting Patrick to the wedding. They gave me a great slugging over it."

The couple settled on the island, Patrick fishing and farming, and Helen running a café and taking in Irish students. They had two children. During this time, Helen also undertook a distance learning course in social science through the Open University.

"I was able to do that from the island and it became a stepping stone to further education later."

When the children were quite young, Patrick was diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease. Sadly, he passed away three years later.

Helen decided to move with her young children to Clonakilty. She applied and was accepted to UCC to study Commerce and was able to work her lectures around her children. For four months each summer, they returned to Cape, where she worked really hard to fund the family for the rest of the year.

Helen studied early in the mornings or while waiting to collect the children from after-school activities. She always wanted to do further education.



James Hegarty, CSO, Muireann Hickey, StrydeTech, Lucie Cunningham, The Home Share, Aisling Conway Lenihan, The Hinks Centre, Dr. Helen McGuirk, Head of Hincks Centre and Jonathan Mullane, StrydeTech at the Silver SMEs project Conference in the Hincks Centre, CIT. Picture: Darragh Kane

She says: "It's a great way to rear the children and I wasn't able or ready at that stage to do a five day a week, nine to five job. It's one way to bring up children alone, when I couldn't afford childcare. That was the prime reason for going to UCC."

She graduated with a B. Comm and was hooked on education. Helen went on to do a Masters in Economics and discovered her love for research.

Her interest in the economics of innovation, particularly in how people in small firms drive innovation, led her to pursue a doctorate.

PhD studies took the family to Limerick. Both children attended second schools level in the city.

"We had six great years there," she says. "Limerick is a wonderful city. All three of us were studying, we were surrounded by books and laptops.

"It was great for the children learning to work to deadlines and complete tasks on time."

Once her PhD was complete, she looked for a permanent job and was appointed economics lecturer in CIT. Her children pursued third level and moved out of home. Helen returned to live in Clonakilty. Meantime she continued research around economics and innovation.

Herself and a colleague were asked to undertake an economic impact study on Cork Harbour, as part of a European-funded project that Hincks was leading, titled COOL ROUTE. They published a paper on their findings. From there an opening came up as head of Hincks. She successfully applied and was appointed in 2018.

"This gives me the time and resources to continue research around entrepreneurship and innovation. CIT is an excellent place to work, there is a very strong collegial ethos there."

The Hincks Centre for entrepreneurship and excellence can have anything up to eight projects on the go at one time, Irish, European, or international. The most recent project undertaken was research into the Silver, SME Small Medium Enterprise, Economy. Delegates from seven European countries visited Ireland for a two day visit, including a conference and a field study visit.

The conference was very well attended by policy makers, members of Cork County Council Age Friendly Alliance, researchers, age friendly towns representatives and colleagues across CIT including from engineering, health and other departments.

The focus is on looking at supporting older people to stay in their community as long as possible and adding value to the economy. CIT's focus is on the city and the regions, therefore the delegates were brought to visit the community shop in Courtmacsherry and two age friendly businesses in Bandon.

"The reception the visitors got made us very proud to showcase the work Cork County council are doing in supporting Age Friendly towns.

"We were able to highlight the opportunities for small business," said Helen. "In particular, the ripple effect from the opening of the Courtmac community shop. Not just that, other businesses in the village have reopened but also the shop is an outlet for local businesses to sell their products."

The emphasis, Helen says, is to develop that strong eco-system for a fast growing population of older people. In the next 40 years in Europe, one in three people will be over the age of 65.

“It is astounding how few businesses realise the value of the older customer. By 2040 the silver economy will be the third largest economy after the US and China.”

Age Friendly businesses cater for older customers by providing suitable chairs to take a rest on, having ready reader glasses behind the counter, and reaching products down from shelves, among other things.

Helen says she is driven to work further at the Hincks centre as CIT works towards a designation as the Munster Technological University when it merges with IT Tralee.

She says: “In an age of lifelong learning, education is for anyone at any age. A PhD is not for everyone. Learning can be as simple as a night class, or a part-time evening course, for example through CIT outreach in Skibbereen.

“The Cork Education and Training Board have learning centres in most towns and offer a diverse range of courses for all abilities and levels.”

She concludes, saying: “Education weighs nothing on the shoulders. It’s about taking the opportunities that life throws at you. Just go for it.”

Dr Helen McGurik is an admirable example of doing exactly that.