

Respect and empowerment the cornerstones of Regari

By James Fogarty

The Regari College in Roscommon is quietly and effectively changing people's lives for the better. Through a comprehensive semester of classes and its ethos of respect and support, it is helping to build resilience and improve mental health in the county and beyond.

Based at the Lodge on the campus of Roscommon University Hospital, Regari (Roscommon East Galway Advanced Recovery in Ireland) was officially opened in 2016, the second recovery college in the country.

Earlier this year the college ran an initiative to grow and sell, appropriately enough as it is the symbol of hope, sunflowers.

One of them is planted just outside the Lodge, and stands at a very impressive, 7 feet, five inches tall.

"Could it be Roscommon's biggest sunflower?" joked Noel Hoare, a recovery education facilitator at the college.

The college is now rolling out its next semester of classes from September to December. These classes, which are for people over 18 years of age, will operate from the library in Roscommon Town and in the Family Resource Centre in Ballinasloe.

Anyone and everyone can benefit from them. Regari's Discovery College initiative, the first of its kind in Ireland, caters for people aged between 14-17 and 18-25 years old.

The classes include managing anxiety, managing emotions, trauma and healing, mindfulness, stress management, and understanding depression and fear.

Thousands of people have availed of the service. During the early period of the pandemic, between April 2020 and June 2021, the college had 1,530 participants in 129 modules, through a blend of online and in-person learning.

Part of Recovery College West, Regari works to improve quality of life and promote social inclusion by empowering people with mental health challenges, their families, friends and the community through co-produced education and learning together.

In practice, this means that modules are produced by collaboration with past students, family members and service providers, ensuring that equality and respect are at the heart of what the college does.

Speaking to the staff at the college, it is clear that they bring professionalism, life experience and above all compassion to their job.

Dermot Flatley, recovery education facilitator,



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tator, explained that 'recovery' is a very personal experience.

"Recovery is very unique, everyone's experience of it is different. For some people, it can be recovering from addiction. It could be recovery from depression or

anxiety, a diagnosis or disability. It could be the loss of a job, grief, or many different things." He explained that Regari was guided by the Chime (connection, hope, identity, meaning and empowerment) model, and that its modules were co-

produced through the lens of Chime.

"The research has shown time and time again from people in recovery, that it was these elements that allow them to recover and manage their recovery. That

underpins our work." Amanda Hunt is one of the peer educators at the college. She explained that the modules are very interactive. "We learn from each other." The classes are for approximately 15-20 people, how-

ever, no one will ever be turned away. One of the forthcoming classes is 'My holistic Lifestyle', which aims to help a person balance the different areas of their life. Another aims to help people find the joy in everyday life.

"I think we can forget to have fun sometimes in life," said Dermot. "You know, everyone is so busy, we're all caught in this hamster wheel. It's about just feeling, slowing down and being aware about what we have." The Covid pandemic saw the health service placed under unprecedented pressures. Now its consequences are also being felt in mental health services.

"During the pandemic, we tried to keep going for as long as possible with face to face education but then we went online," Amanda explained.

In terms of the mental health consequences of the pandemic, Chloe Costello, peer educator with Regari's Discovery College, said that there was a lot more anxiety, particularly social anxiety.

"People coming out of the far side of the pandemic, going back into social settings, it's difficult for everybody, not just those who experienced anxiety before the pandemic," she said.

Dermot added that many students welcomed the opportunity to reconnect with each other following Covid.

"I have noticed that as a theme that came up a lot with students. They were very appreciative of Regari and what we offer, an opportunity to build their confidence and get back out there. The online course allowed for



Dermot Flatley, Recovery Education Facilitator; Amanda Hunt, Peer Educator; Chloe Costello, Peer Educator and Noel Hoare, Recovery Education Facilitator at Regari. Not present on the day was Julie Fraser, a recovery education facilitator, and Orla O'Duinn, Recovery College Co-Ordinator and OT Manager.

Pic. Gerard O'Loughlin

College in Roscommon



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that and then in time they were able to come in person. I think that was very successful,” said Dermot.

Noel Hoare, who like the other members of staff, is a passionate advocate for mental health. He told the Herald about the mindfulness classes being run by at the college, knowing its many benefits personally.

“I think it is more important than ever and it is something that can benefit everyone,” he said. He added he has come from a place of knowing nothing about mindfulness to “coming full circle and really living in the present”.

“It makes a tremendous difference to how we live, that we’re not in our heads the whole time and we are not thinking about tomorrow, because tomorrow never comes anyway. Not to be rumi-

nating on the past, the only place we can live is here and now.” As well as providing classes in the community, Regari also works with people in Roscommon’s department of psychiatry.

“We are also currently in the middle of devising an elective model for third year nursing students in TUS and that will be rolled out next term. They are the future of the service so it’s great to get them trained in the recovery approach,” said Amanda.

That elective will be open to everyone, students and members of the local community, the staff explained.

As well as providing an invaluable service locally, Regari is also contributing to research, with a paper ‘A Co-Created Multi-Method Evaluation of Recovery

Education in Ireland’ published last September. This paper was a collaboration between Mental Health Ireland the NUI Galway, and Amanda was on the research team.

The Discovery College has also published research, ‘Bring recovery to young people: the development of a “discovery college” in Ireland’.

Chloe explained that the Discovery College is currently doing workshops with youth organisations around the county and also working with the child and adolescent and adult mental health services.

“I am hoping to go into schools as well,” she said. “Any youth organisation in Roscommon that would like us to come in, they only have to contact us.”

“The workshops are co-produced and ready to go. They can choose what they want and we’ll come in and deliver it.” These would include workshops on anxiety, low mood, social media and building resilience.

The registration date for the Roscommon workshops is September 5th at the Lodge and September 6th for Ballinasloe in the Family Resource Centre.

For more information, contact details and timetables, please visit www.recoverycollege-west.ie.



Noel Hoare with the sunflower, which has grown to over 2 metres, at Regari College. Pic. Gerard O’Loughlin

Student testimonials

I highly recommend Regari as I have benefited enormously. It provides great support and education. The biggest advantage is that people who attend have life experience and know how it feels. I am looking forward to attending for next season.

I have only very positive comments to make for the Regari programmes. Over the past number of years, I have taken part, regularly in most of the sessions. I have benefitted enormously from the highly professional and helpful way the various modules have been researched and delivered, by the excellent facilitators.

I have learned many skills which continue to help me cope with anxiety, self-worth, making boundaries and many other topics.

I have made some new friends, and as a result we can phone and meet up, in times of stress and help each other when necessary, and to socialize, meeting for coffee and meals regularly. We greatly appreciated the

generosity of the team during Covid putting on the Zoom sessions and keeping in touch weekly.

I am attending workshops for a number of years. When I first started attending I didn’t know what to expect. I soon discovered Regari is for everyone, all one needs to attend is merely an interest in mental health.

At various stages of my life, I have experienced loss including bereavement, loneliness, and anxiety to name a few.

There’s nothing like these workshops as they are very relatable to everyday life and ordinary experiences. The workshops are interactive, a safe place to share

and non-judgmental. I have learned so much from everyone’s contribution.

I now know that my mental health and wellbeing is just as important as my physical health.

Attending the workshops for me is one way of being proactive in looking after my mental health.

Over the years I have acquired the know how in handling my anxiety, to focus more on the present, to take more notice of what’s in my environment, to accept the ups and downs of life better and so much more.

During the heavy days of Covid, the sessions on Zoom were so valuable and a lifeline. It was such an anxious and unknown

time and being able to share my thoughts and feelings and in turn to hear everyone else’s was huge.

I felt connected knowing others were experiencing something similar. Even the simple thing of seeing people’s faces without masks made such a difference.

Each and every facilitator from the top down are professional and at the same time very ordinary.

They have shared their own experiences which makes them easy to relate to. They are so approachable and welcoming. Regari has enabled me to make new friends and build on existing ones.

I believe in lifelong education and Regari offers the opportunity for all to gain insight into mental health issues in a very practical and simple way that meets the needs and interests of the participants.

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