

HEADLINERS

I'm listening says Commissioner

Commissioner meets Headliners reporters Eabha Doherty and Aiofe Boyle

Forget the labels and assumptions, all young people are worth listening to says Commissioner for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland.

Tired of the bad press suggesting that all young people are trouble, irresponsible and that their opinions don't matter we were delighted to meet and interview one woman whose mission it is to listen to and celebrate the value that each young person can bring to the world.

At the time of interview Patricia Lewsley, Commissioner for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland had been in post for 10 months and had met a massive 2,000 young people.



Who is your inspiration and why?

I suppose my inspiration for my job is my children. I have five children and four grandsons and I think the thing that amazes me about them is that they are all different. They have similarities but they all do different things and they're all very strong individuals.

What three human qualities annoy you the most?

I suppose the key one is selfishness. People who don't listen to others annoy me, those who think they can communicate well but they talk and don't listen. People who bully and put other people down really annoy me too.

What are three attributes you love to see in other people?

I think someone who cares and has a very caring attitude and someone who listens, particularly to young people and what they have to say. I also love seeing happy people who share their happiness and spread it around.

How important do you think it is that young people have access to an organisation such as Headliners?

I think it's very important, I've seen some of the work that Headliners have done and it's given people the opportunity to have a voice and maybe a voice that a lot of people wouldn't have assumed that they had. Also, Headliners raises issues that are very important to young people and it's been allowing young people to be creative and inspiring them to use the media in such a way to send out more positive things than negative.

"I will be a powerful, influential and independent voice for all children and young people. I will be there to represent their interests, protect their rights and to challenge all those who work with and for children to do better," – who said this?

Hmm... I think that was me! I said that in my opening remarks when I was appointed Commissioner for Children and Young People.

Have you fulfilled your aims?

Well, I suppose my aims are ongoing and I've fulfilled some of them so far. My key aim was to get out and meet as many children and young people as I possibly can and in the ten months I've been doing this job, I've met almost 2,000 of them and I hope to meet lots more!

Do you have a favourite quote or saying?

My favourite saying is that if you give someone responsibility, they will act responsibly. I think that a lot of young people are never given responsibility to prove that they can act responsibly, people just assume that they're irresponsible.

If you weren't in your current job, what would you like to be doing?

In my previous life I was a politician and I enjoyed that very much and that's how I got the opportunity to work with a lot of children and children's organisations. That's what stood me in good stead when I applied for this job so if I wasn't doing this job I'd like to go back and do my old one.

What do you think could and should be put in place to support children and young people and reduce the number of suicides in Northern Ireland?

What I think should be put in place is the opportunity to talk to someone but of course it's not just about that it's also very important that the services are there. There was a review of mental health and learning disabilities done which was called **The Bamford Review**, and it particularly looked at children and young people and how vulnerable they are and what we would like to see is that implemented by government because that would bring everyone one step closer to trying to help to address these issues.

If you had to promote Ireland to young people from abroad, what would you say?

I'd tell them about all the craic we have over here! I'd also tell them that we have huge numbers of young people in Northern Ireland that are very multi-talented and very often don't get the opportunity to use that but our young people are very friendly and they're very welcoming and as I said, the craic's 90!

Describe a typical day as the Commissioner for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland.

There isn't really any sort of typical day in my job, but yesterday I started off in Armagh and met some young people from one of the integrated schools there and then I met the mayor and some politicians. I also met media figures and tried to influence them. Then I went to Enniskillen and Omagh and with regards to the tragedy that happened in Omagh very recently I went into some of the schools there and gave them any support I could offer. I spoke to the mayor and some participation officers about what we could do to help young people in Omagh who may be suffering from grief.

What has been the biggest challenge in your career so far?

The biggest challenge in my career as the commissioner so far, although it has been quite short, has been looking forward to how we will promote [NICCY](#) (Northern Ireland Commission for Children and Young People) and how we will move into our plans for 2008-2011. We're making sure that all the things that we're doing are co-ordinated, that everything runs smoothly and that we get the best out of everything we do, particularly for all the children and young people that we meet.

What would you say has been the most rewarding thing about being a Commissioner?

I think the most rewarding thing has been getting the opportunity to go out and meet so many different groups and types of children and young people, from very young pre-school children to young people at third level education and all the different marginalised groups like travellers, disabled people and ethnic minorities, all types of people from all across the board. One of the most challenging and humbling things has been meeting young people who are asylum seekers and also going to a young offenders centre and finding out about the issues that face the people there.

Has the new Assembly impacted on your position, and how?

I'm not sure that it's impacted a lot but for me it's good that it's there because part of my role is not just to advise government but to challenge them and if we have our own local politicians then we have better access to them so I can raise issues with the Minister for Health or the Minister for Education regarding suicides and I can talk to the first and deputy first ministers and advise them on what they should be doing to ensure that they deliver for children and young people. So for me, I think the impact of having the Assembly there is good because it's local ministers and we can make them more accountable.

What do you feel are the challenges and difficulties facing young people today?

I think there are a lot of challenges for young people and we've mentioned suicides and the rates of suicides of young men and I think that sometimes society challenges young people and I suppose the issue of peer pressure and having to conform to doing certain things. I think the biggest challenge faced by young people is having their say, that in fact when somebody asks them for contribution that they actually take it on board and do something about it. I think that young people feel that older people talk to them or at them sometimes about what they're concerned about and then don't do anything about it.

If had to express one wish for young people of the future, what would it be?

I would like to see young people reflected in all walks of society. That's what NICCY want to see in school councils so that young people can have their say there and also in community forums, when ministers talk of community planning and changing where people live, they have to listen to what young people want just as much as anyone else. If there was a shadow assembly for young people they could be given the commitment by government so they they're making a vital and valid contribution to society and their voice is being heard by everyone.

About this article

Patricia Lewsley was interviewed by Eabha Doherty, Aoife Boyle and Sorcha Boyle. It was published in [The NorthWest Telegraph](#) and [The Sunday Journal](#).

1 comment

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It makes me depressed looking at these comments. Obviously teens know very little about marijuana or its effects. Weed doesn't contain a single addictive chemical such as nicotine or alcohol. This means that unless you have an addictive personality, it'll be nearly impossible for you to be physically addicted to it. Others are at risk because of their personality. Fat people that claim to be addicted to food are a good example of this. Also smoking weed one time will not do any lasting damage to your brain. You must smoke large amounts on a regular basis to be effected. Are people that use drugs losers crying out for help? Sometimes yes, but the vast majority of users only smoke recreationally. Education is the key in this issue. Misinformation is being spoon feed to kids creating the since that anyone using pot is a loser and is at risk of becoming a crack addict. This needs to stop. If you are interested in this subject you should do your own research. Remember to get your info from a non biased sit tho. trevor (age 16) from usa, 30 December 1899 00:00

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