



sense of isolation. If you're working at home and not socialising in the community or working with colleagues it might create more loneliness," notes Cooney.

For Mary Keogh, who has worked in the area of disability rights for many years through initiatives such as ConnectAble, a service aimed at getting people with disabilities involved in volunteer projects, another issue is getting access to the education and skills that, for many people, is readily available through a mainstream education.

"It's about not being connected into the network

that people in mainstream schooling are able to access," she says.

Indeed the NDA also identified a wide range of other inequalities experienced by people with disabilities, including that just over half (50.8 per cent) have no formal second-level educational qualifications.

But, as Keogh suggests, volunteering can be a really good way for people with disabilities to get experience and engage with the workforce.

"It can be a step into self-employment," she says.

ANSWERING THE CALL



BEING PROFOUNDLY deaf has proved to be no obstacle for Caroline Carswell in fulfilling her career ambitions. Like many deaf people, Caroline was born into a hearing family with no experience of deafness. Rather than learning sign language, she is verbal deaf, meaning she speaks and lip-reads in English.

Unlike many deaf children growing up in Ireland in the 1970s, Caroline was sent to a mainstream school rather than a school for the deaf.

"My parents made a brave choice to go against the grain and chose a mainstream education after seeking advice at home and abroad as to how best to help me to learn to listen and to speak," she recalls.

After school, she went to Trinity College Dublin at a time when no disability office existed there and no supports were provided.

"However, I survived and gained many new friends, edited the college newspaper and graduated with my peers," she says.

A career in marketing and online publishing followed, but in 2007 she went out on her own and set up Irish Deaf Kids (IDK). "The time was right to set up a website resource to encourage parents to make fully informed decisions about their deaf child's learning and to explore different opportunities and options," she says of her decision.

But the move was not without challenges, and Caroline recalls fearing that isolation would be a risk. Happily, her interaction with Social Entrepreneurs Ireland helped in this regard. As with many entrepreneurs, financing was also a big challenge, but she notes that IDK's income is now growing organically through a mix of funding streams. And there are everyday challenges that are unique to her deafness. When she is attending a meeting in another office, for example, she can find herself unable to communicate through the intercom; or when accessing voicemails on her mobile phone, she has to ask for help.

"I would encourage others with disability to consider self-employment as a viable avenue," she says, adding that self-employment can give people with disability more autonomy over their working lives and environment (social and physical), and breaks can be incorporated into the working day (if needed) to take medication, for simple time out, for physiotherapy, or for any other specific needs a particular person has.

"That flexibility can be exactly what a person needs, but could find difficult to achieve or to find, in a larger working environment when surrounded by people," she says, adding that she finds "having flexible hours, the variety of everyday duties, constantly meeting new people and being able to work 'untethered', in different locations," as being key advantages of working for herself.

However, she does warn that for it to work, people should ensure that they have back-up in areas where their physical environment or access solutions may be less than optimal, and not to be afraid to call on trusted advisors or friends for support if and when needed.