



"The Red House" by NIID student Sarah Carroll

INNOVATION,
IMAGINATION,
CREATIVITY

THE MARGARET MCLOUGHLIN ART
PROJECT WILL ENABLE STUDENTS
WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES
TO ENGAGE WITH THE ARTS



MARGARET MCLOUGHLIN

In the splendid surroundings of the Provost's House at Trinity College Dublin, the Margaret McLoughlin Art Project was announced in June, 2011. The project is named after Margaret, daughter of Joan and Tony McLoughlin, and sister to David, Louise and Kieran McLoughlin who is President and CEO of The Worldwide Ireland Funds.

MARGARET, who had Down's syndrome, passed away in 2003 at the age of 25. Working with The American Ireland Fund, the McLoughlin Family set up a fund commemorating her spirit, vitality and joy. Together with friends and supporters, the McLoughlin family reached their target of raising \$200,000. In June of 2011, they were delighted to make a gift in this amount to the National Institute of Intellectual Disability (NIID) at Trinity College Dublin, the wonderful center integrating those with special needs into a third level environment. Specifically the gift will fund the innovative NIID Expressive Arts Programme which will enable students to engage with art, drama, poetry and film. The funding will allow the Margaret McLoughlin Art Project to establish:

- **The Annual Margaret McLoughlin Art Event**—where students can showcase their work in art and poetry
- **The Margaret McLoughlin Student Prize**—to be awarded annually to a second year NIID student who has demonstrated excellence in the field of art
- **An Education Space**—a dedicated space for art activities
- **A Poetry & Pictures Book**—a collection of art and poetry resulting from the students' workshops that will showcase the creative work and convey the talents of people with intellectual disability.

Friends and supporters of the project gathered to announce the gift in June and what follows is the speech by Margaret's mother Joan that night.

"This is a wonderful occasion for our family, and one which none of us could have envisaged during Margaret's lifetime. When Margaret died in 2003, our idea of setting up a fund in her memory in order to help mentally handicapped children was given a huge boost by an extremely generous donation received from Mr. Jerry Callaghan, who has travelled from N.Y. especially to be with us tonight.

Having launched the fund, we received great support. Margaret's siblings especially, rallied their friends, all of whom knew and loved Margaret, to support the cause. A large group got together each year to participate in the Womens' Mini Marathon, and those not free to participate became sponsors. Groups of runners also took part in similar events in New York's Central Park. Golf Classics and other activities were organised, and gradually the fund grew, to the wonderful figure of \$200,000.

The question of how best to use this money was discussed by the family, and many options were considered. We were aware of the establishment of the NIID Certificate in Contemporary Living programme, and we decided that this was the road we would like to follow. We decided this mainly because we saw it as a very progressive initiative, which provided the opportunity for people like Margaret to enhance their lives and be given a means to develop the talents which they undoubtedly possess.



Members of the McLoughlin Family with NIID students Tomas Murphy and Mei Lin Yap. Also pictured are American Ireland Fund Board Director Jerry Callaghan; Prof. PJ Drudy, Chair of the NIID Management Committee; Prof. Brendan Kennelly of Trinity College and John Kubiak, Training & Learning Officer of NIID.

I would like to say a few words about mentally handicapped children—not all mentally handicapped children of course, because the term obviously covers a very wide range of intellectual disability. But children like Margaret and many of her friends, who were categorised as being in the mild range of mental handicap; I feel that their potential can very easily be underestimated. Simple things for instance, Margaret conjured up the idea of having her own Rock Band, which she christened ‘Girlzone’ being the female equivalent of ‘Boyzone’ to whom she was devoted—although her devotion was severely tested when Ronan Keating got married. As she often remarked afterwards ‘The trouble with Ronan is that he married the wrong woman.’ Her sister Louise made sure that she got opportunities to view her heroes by bringing her to all the Boyzone concerts and later to Westlife, when she switched her allegiance to them. These things are unremarkable in themselves, and are fairly typical of many adolescent children, but their very normality can be seen as indicating that people designated as being mentally handicapped are still capable of forming concepts and using their creative imaginations to create mental scenarios which involve a certain degree of mental ability.

Something that came to light in Margaret’s case was the fact that she was capable of taking part in art work and it became a great interest for her during the final years of her life. This was one of the things that particularly impressed us about the NIID programme: that they recognised the fact that many of these people have artistic talent and the students had already staged an impressive art exhibition in 2008.

I cannot end without saying that children who have Down’s Syndrome, in general, and certainly in Margaret’s case, have extraordinarily loving and lovable personalities. They possess imagination, intuition and many other qualities. I will end with a quotation which I think expresses this kind of unpretentious charm. It is from a book by Daniel O’Leary and is about the mystery and uniqueness of childhood. He says, ‘Small children somehow know that they have nothing of themselves on which to base any claim to gift or favour, yet they still believe that love will reach out and enfold them. Devoid of adult pretentiousness and full of their belief in being unconditionally loved, they have not yet begun the endless, competitive quest for self-justification, for proving their worthiness, for being in the state of grace, for relentlessly producing something better than anybody else. Here lies the freedom and joy of the daughters and sons of God.’

This expresses for me the unique and life enhancing positivity of these children which radiates to all those lucky enough to come within their orbit. The beauty of it is that they are totally unaware of the fact that this unpretentious love of theirs is exceptional and life enhancing for those around them. By helping these young people and giving them opportunities to develop their lives, we are not only helping individual children, but society in general.”

Margaret’s family intend to continue to grow the Margaret McLoughlin Fund and to assist similar work to ensure young people like Margaret achieve their potential and recognition in society.



NIID student Mei Lin Yap, at work.