



(L-R) Rosaleen McDonagh and Northumbria University Chancellor Tanni Grey-Thompson

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Northumbria graduate earns groundbreaking role on Irish Human Rights Commission

A Northumbria University PhD graduate has made history by becoming the first disabled female Traveller to earn a place on the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC)

Rosaleen McDonagh gained her PhD entitled *From Shame to Pride, The Politics of Disabled Traveller Identity*, from Northumbria's [Department of Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing](#) in 2019.

A graduate of Trinity College Dublin, Rosaleen will help promote and protect human rights and equality in Ireland as part of her new role within the IHREC.

Growing up on a Traveller site and attending special school with what she describes as “a very low expectation” Rosaleen knew she was destined for more.

“The experience of living in various care homes to sporadically living on a Traveller campsite provided me with ambition,” she said. “The ambition just to get up in the morning to fill the hours, the belief that you’re born for something more.

“At 18 my name was just about all I could manage to write. State exams or qualifications were not part of my learning. Then a long journey into adult education brought me confidence, self-esteem and helped me with developing a commitment to my own education.

“My PhD supervisor Professor Toby Brandon was incredibly patient and generous. Not many Travellers have a positive experience of school. Professor Brandon had done his research he supported me and helped me develop an academic way of writing. He never applied pressure or made me feel like I was worthless. At the same time there was always the challenge and the push which was vital.”

Having struggled with nerves throughout the interview process, Rosaleen was “shocked” and “delighted” when she was told by the IHREC that she had been successful.

“Normally I am a nervous and cautious person,” she said. “My Cerebral Palsy is very evident there is no modifying, containing or controlling it. That morning before the interview it felt right, the questions, my life experience, the interview panel, everything worked in my favour.

“Human rights, particularly minority indigenous peoples’ rights, alongside disability rights, are the areas of work that interest me. However, there are national issues in Ireland relating to citizenship and asylum seekers that are very concerning in the context of human rights violations.”

A 2018 report by the Department of Education showed that just one per cent

of Traveller children progress to third-level education compared with more than half of the wider settled population.

In 2017, just 61 students in higher education were “self-declared” Irish Travellers. The number was an increase from 41 in 2016.

Rosaleen was able to study for her PhD after successfully applying for a scholarship from Northumbria University in Disability Studies. At that time nobody within her Traveller community had a PhD, as the expense and access issues seemed insurmountable.

“From special school to a PhD, the journey is a bit blurred,” she admits. “My lived reality of ableism and racism will influence the work I do as a human rights commissioner both nationally and globally.”

[Professor Toby Brandon](#), Rosaleen’s PhD supervisor and Professor in Mental Health and Disability at Northumbria University, said: “Very rarely in an academic career does someone with Rosaleen’s lived experience, original way of thinking, humour and pure determination come along.

“It was Dr Sarah Lonbay’s and my absolute pleasure to work with her and be part of this ground-breaking research. This has led to her well-earned recognition as a unique voice within the intersection of human rights and marginalised communities.”

Northumbria University’s Department of Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing is ranked top 10 nationally for its education programmes, while over half of the department’s research in social work and social policy has been rated as world leading or internationally excellent.

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