



Union Learning Representatives Conference 2017

Organising to Learn – Learn to Organise Award winners



Union Learning Representative of the Year 2017

Gareth Moore AEGIS

My education first took a hit due to illness (had several hearts attacks in p6) this meant I was not allowed in school for a year. This meant I was restricted to a tutor at home, 2 hrs a day, 2 days per week, for nearly a year and meant when I returned to school I was very far behind in all subjects and was not able to undertake the 11plus. (11 plus failure)

This impacted my learning as I moved into secondary school an initially felt very dumb at school because everyone seemed to be ahead of me.

I worked very hard in my first three years at secondary school, trying to make up from my poor starting position at secondary. Despite moving from the lowest classes in my first year to the highest in most subjects, my school still had concerns over my ability to complete GCSE's and went as far as to block me from even sitting GSCE English against my will.

This was devastating to me, as I was well aware that a C in GSCE maths, English and science was the minimum grades needed to progress to further education or to secure employment.

Following many discussions with the school they continually refused to allow me to even attempt GSCE English. I then took matters into my own hands and while completing the rest of my GSCE's, I also paid for a night class set up for adult learners returning to education to gain their GSCE English.

This provided the route to actually sit my GSCE English. This course was only a few hours per week and proved challenging as I was not availing of any support towards GCSE English from my school.

After a massive effort I did secure my GSCE English in spite of the school not in collaboration with it.

After my GCSE's I felt vindicated in my actions. Although I scored very well at GCSE level (much better than anyone expected) I still felt angry that I had to fight so hard just for the opportunity to sit my GCSE's. Despite my success as a young man I was still struggling with confidence, I still felt like I was not up to scratch, that I wasn't as able as others, as I was singled out by my school and deemed to not be of the same standard as everyone else.



Following my successful GSCE's results I progressed to another school to complete my A-level's. During my second year my father passed and I pulled away from education, I struggled to return as I felt once again I had missed a lot of time and I was very conscious of how this impacted me in my early years at primary school. I didn't have the confidence or belief that I would be able to catch up and feared being labelled a failure once more, therefore, out of fear, I pulled out of my final A-level exams.

This impacted me later on as I felt I had let myself down, I went into the world of employment and through hard work I progressed with a few different companies' over the proceeding few years. Then I arrived at HML Derry and joined the union. The union represented something I believed in strongly, I understood their value and importance in a society of low wage, low opportunity and high unemployment.

I very quickly became a union rep and received numerous training courses to allow me assist colleagues in difficult times, I felt great pride and passion within my role.

We later brought on board Union learn and I was select as a union learning rep, this appealed to me on a very personal level owing to my past difficulties with learning and understood that many people where let down by a system which is to focused on leader boards as opposed to the best outcome for their students.

I understood the physiological impact of falling through the cracks of a system and not knowing where to turn, the frustration, anger and regrettably the loss of confidence and self-worth.

Through work place learning, thanks to the union, I found a route back into education firstly in smaller courses like Sage and professional qualifications to improve employability and have recently completed my Cemap and equity release qualifications with formal professional designations, I am now certified to provide mortgage and insurance advice in both the UK and ROI. In addition to my coaching badge from the FAI!

Through Union Learn I have regained my confidence in myself, the confidence to believe that with the right support and motivation, no subjects are too hard and no goal is beyond my reach.

Union learn gave me back my self-belief, it showed me that past difficulties I had with learning was not my failure but a failure of the education system. It opened my eyes to the plight of so many who came through an education system like me and the only thing taken away from school was a low self-esteem

I have spent the past few years regularly speaking with numerous union members and non-members, community groups, general public and anyone who will listen to explain the benefits of return to education. My union learn team has been working tirelessly to bring people back into education from short courses to get them back into the swing of learning to high end professional qualifications which provided the opportunity to gain good steady and well paid employment.



Thanks to Union Learn my life has been changed forever, I went from feeling like my future was destined to be moving from one minimum wage dead end position to another, however now thanks to Union learn and the qualifications I have gained through it, I have a wide range of employment opportunities and the belief that I am in control of my future and any dream imagined can be realised.

I am thankful that I have been given the chance to prove myself able, despite the label of a failure throughout my secondary education.

It is due to this life changing experience that I have become steadfast in my belief that everyone needs a second chance, that every person has the ability to achieve whatever they wish to achieve. I often tell people about my experience and help them understand that their lack of results from formal education and fearfulness towards new learning is not a representation of their potential, but instead the result of falling through the cracks of an education system which fails thousands of kids every year. They are not alone in their experience and we will stand with them to put it right.

I have seen the impact on my fellow colleagues, union members and members of the community who have gone through courses I have set up through union learn, I have seen the real life impact of returning to education. Our learners can often feel nervous beginning their first course, but on completion they always say that they wish they had returned to education sooner. I have seen unemployed members of the community secure employment thanks to our courses. I have seen young colleagues return to university to give it another try. I have seen people soar in confidence as they complete one course after another. I have truly seen the benefit of union learn and I will never forget the impact it has made to me personally and my community.

When people return to education after a long time we begin small and build from there, we discuss their concerns and we move at their pace, one small success followed by another, one small step after another, continually supported until they achieve what they felt they could not achieve and then as they look back over the past few months or years and recognise that they came further than they ever thought possible, and they begin to understand, that what they once felt was impossible to achieve, is only another short stroll down the learning path.

On behalf of my learners, my community and myself, we are thankful to the union learn project for making a real difference in our lives.



Essential Skills Trade Union Learner of the Year 2017

John Kennedy, UNITE, JTI Gallaghers

John left school at 16 with no qualifications and started as a junior baker on his 16th birthday. He returned to school to do exams and left with only the ability to cook you an omelette with his Home Economics exam.

Other than compulsory in house training courses in JTI Gallaghers, John thought he had no need to continue with any sort of education as he was invested in his job in the warehouse. It was the devastating unexpected announcement of closure of JTI that galvanised John to get prepared for what was ahead.

JTI didn't have any ULRs as the general apathy to additional outside courses was wide spread. Everyone thought they had a job for life. John organised his shift into classes and they all gained their level 2 Essential Skills in Maths, English and ICT. Completing 2 subjects at once in their own time.

John was the spine of those classes. He didn't stop there, he promoted and organised other shifts into the same mind-set and as a result he was responsible for over 120 Essential Skills qualifications over a period of 3 months.

John is one of the few employees still in JTI. It is a testament to his loyalty that the company have asked him to remain to help with the close down.

Johns' future is still uncertain. However, with his Essential Skills qualifications under his belt and reskilling funding from JTI, John is taking his time to choose what direction to go next. With his new found learning confidence he understands the importance of taking time to make the right decisions and isn't scared about choosing a new career to pursue, even at his ripe old age!

Unite nominated John for the Essential Skills Award to highlight the depth of his character and the sheer amount of colleagues he brought on a new learning journey during a time of distress and uncertainty. He encouraged calm and promoted confidence and possibility.

He was the light during a very dark time.



Open University Trade Union Learner of the Year 2017

Sylvia Rzepka, UNISON

Sylvia arrived to Northern Ireland ten years ago with her husband and 2-year-old daughter. She had completed the equivalent of A Levels in Poland but neither her nor her husband could get a job. They had a friend in Northern Ireland who got a job for her husband as a window cleaner. He came over and she and her daughter followed six months later. The now also have a second daughter aged 6.

She had been working two jobs as a domestic in the Trust and in a nursing home. Her husband gave up work to stay home and provide childcare. In her role, she got to see nurses at work and thought that was something she would like to do. She spoke to her manager who suggested she consider the K101 which was being run by UNISON in partnership with the Trust to see how she got on

Doing the K101 gave her the confidence to apply for a post in the Trust as a nursing auxiliary. It also helped with the interview as it showed she was keen and enabled her to discuss health and social care topics which she had studied.

It has also improved her English, both in language and writing as she has had to use the dictionary, check out words and write down her thoughts and ideas in the essays.

She has spoken to some of the other domestics about the course but they want to see first how she gets on. She has been encouraging them and now some are thinking of applying this year.

It has been a big challenge writing academically in her second language – English. She has had to engage actively with the materials and for the videos, she has to listen a couple of times and use a dictionary to make sure she understands correctly. At the tutorials – her classmates have really helped her as well as the tutor.

