

Queen Margaret student becomes charity 'face'

A PR and media student from Queen Margaret University is the new face of Arthritis Care's fundraising campaign which is just being launched.

Twenty-six year old Denise Munro from Easter Road in Edinburgh has lived with rheumatoid arthritis from birth. Her story has not only helped other people living with the condition to cope and manage with their day-to-day tasks, her involvement with the charity has already resulted in £36,000 worth of donations via the direct mail campaign in which she features throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Denise uses her personal experience of the auto immune disease to help support people – both young and old – across the UK, and she is also utilising the skills which she has learned on her university degree course, to ensure the health messages are being communicated in an effective way.

Arthritis means inflammation of the joints and most people with the disease will experience pain and difficulty moving around. An astonishing 10 million people are living with arthritis in the UK and for many of them the pain takes over their daily lives and can be very distressing both mentally and physically. The common misconception is that arthritis just affects older people, but it can affect individuals of all ages. Surprisingly, 12,000 children under the age of 16 have arthritis in the UK, and approximately 27,000 under the age of 25.

Profoundly affected by her experiences of medical treatment and her school life, Denise always felt different from everyone else. She explained:- "Sometimes I would be unable to walk – it might last all day or even a week – and no-one

really understood. I was terrified of my illness. My memories of hospital treatment during childhood are still my nightmares.”

At 16 years of age, Denise ran away from home to avoid family pressuring her to return to hospital for further treatment. Although the family relationship is good, Denise has never returned home choosing instead to live alone. She spent eight painful years hiding away so no-one could see what her arthritis was doing to her. She was too scared to face up to the illness and ask for help.

Denise said: “I made a point of doing everything I could to avoid medication and telling people the truth about my rheumatoid arthritis. I hid it from friends, family and employers. It took me until I got back into education before I felt ready to speak about it.”

She continued: “Arthritis has the stigma of being an older person’s disease which made it difficult to explain to people and for them to understand my circumstances. It really wasn’t until I came into contact with Arthritis Care’s Joint Potential Project, two years ago, that things began to improve.”

When she learned how Joint Potential’s self-management courses help young people with arthritis to manage their health, she knew immediately it was for her.

“Plucking up the courage to go to the first course was the best decision I’ve ever made”, said Denise, “even though I was shaking like a leaf before hand. At last, I discovered I wasn’t the only young person trying to work out how to live with arthritis and do at least some of the things other people take for granted.

Volunteering for Arthritis Care in Scotland has become a big part of Denise’s life both personally and professionally. She began applying the knowledge that she was learning from her PR

degree at Queen Margaret University to develop effective communication materials for the charity.

Denise explained: "In November, Arthritis Care in Scotland launched a new peer-to-peer support website called 'Connect Scotland' at the Scottish Parliament. As part of the launch I was responsible for interviewing Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's Health Minister. It turned out to be a great hands-on learning experience in terms of producing relevant questions, filming the event and the time management of every last detail."

Denise has also created a video blog called 'Deni's Rheum', hosted on the Connect Scotland website, where she continues to share her experiences of living with rheumatoid arthritis. Effectively, this work has kick started her career in the communications industry. Although she is benefiting personally from the support of Arthritis Care, the charity is now relying on her story and skills to raise its website profile and communicate valuable information.

Denise confirmed: "Having the opportunity to dovetail my academic work with live projects which positively impact on other people's lives, has been a life changing experience. Not only is my work with Arthritis Care helping me develop my practical PR skills, it's also allowing me to grow as a person and support other young people like myself. Although I still have fears about my condition, I am now supported and feel more confident and excited about my future.

She added: "Queen Margaret University has been very supportive. Due to my health issues, I have had to spread my studies over a longer period of time than many other students, but I am determined to complete my degree and not let my arthritis hold me back from having a successful career – hopefully in the voluntary sector."

Ann Turner, Programme Leader for the BA (Hons) Public Relations and Media at Queen Margaret University, said: " We

have been able to support Denise through her studies, while she manages her condition. Her determination to complete her degree and help others through her voluntary work for the charity is an inspiration. Applying theory to practice is a keystone of the PR and Media programme and gaining industry experience is essential to help prepare students for careers in Public Relations. So Denise's work for Arthritis Care provides invaluable experience and clearly demonstrates her ability to practice PR, which I am sure will stand her in very good stead when she enters the job market after graduation".

Denise's story will be highlighted in the Arthritis Care in Scotland direct mail campaign which is planned for Spring 2012.

You can learn about how Denise used self-management techniques to improve her health and well-being on the [Arthritis Care website](#).