



# A Font of Knowledge

Bernadette Dowd talks to *Rehab News* about her involvement in the RehabCare Citizens Information Centre in Dunboyne, Co. Meath.



**B**ERNADETTE DOWD IS A font of knowledge. With her calm demeanour and listening ear, it's easy to see why Bernadette is a woman you'd want to have around, particularly in times of uncertainty and stress.

It's no wonder then, that if you call into the RehabCare physical and sensory resource centre in Dunboyne, Co. Meath on a Thursday afternoon, chances are that you'll be met by a queue of people all waiting patiently to talk to Bernadette and her fellow RehabCare service user, Tom Dunn.

For the past three years, Bernadette and Tom have run the Dunboyne Citizens Information Centre from the RehabCare resource centre. The Citizens Information Centre, the only one in the South Meath area, is open to members of the public every Thursday from 10.30am to 4pm and is completely free of charge.

According to Bernadette, RehabCare service users became involved with the Citizens Information Centre after the existing service provider left about four years ago.

As you would expect, there is quite a lot of training involved in becoming an information provider for the

Citizens Information Centre. Both Bernadette and Tom undertook an intensive FETAC-accredited information providers course in Navan, Co. Meath.

Running over a period of six months, the weekly course covered topics from maternity benefits to registering a death, and everything in between. Guest lecturers spoke on issues as varied as marriage, unemployment, homelessness, consumer rights, emigration and advocacy.

Given the intensity of the course, it was no surprise that there was a lot of study and typing involved, a challenge for Bernadette who has rheumatoid arthritis. However, with the support of the staff in RehabCare she was able to successfully complete her studies and gain her qualification.

"There's literally no aspect of life that we don't deal with in some way at the Citizens Information Centre. We are the first port of call for so many people. Lately, with rising unemployment, there's been a definite increase in the number of people who are using the service.

"You get a great satisfaction from helping people. You see them when they first come in and then the relief on their faces when they leave. Sometimes there's just nothing we can do to help them, but even just lending a listening ear can make the world of difference. It's so important to treat people with respect. People know when you are being genuine and when you take time to listen and to care about their situation and their worries."

How much of a leap into the unknown was this whole experience for Bernadette? "I clearly remember my first day at the training course in

Navan. I was sitting next to people who had been working for years and all I could think is 'what am I doing here?' But as the classes went on, I realised that I could do this, and be good at it. I've met so many people and this experience has opened up so many opportunities for me. My confidence has just blossomed over the past few years.

"It's hard to believe that just four years ago I was sitting at home not doing anything and now look at me! I'm busy writing my second book following on from the positive reaction that I got from my autobiography *Bernadette the Bolt: My Story so Far*. I'm involved in the Peer Advocacy Group here at RehabCare and facilitate the centre's digital photography programme. What's more, I volunteer once a week at the Citizens Information Centre in Ashbourne.

"There are times I have to pinch myself when I see what I've achieved and it all comes back to RehabCare and the staff here in Dunboyne. There's such a wonderful family atmosphere at the centre. You are among people who understand you and your abilities. Most of all, you can just be yourself, and that's so liberating." ■

### Who to contact

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