

HOW I BECAME A**TUTOR AND MENTOR****SANDRA McMURRAN**

The Post: Tutor/Mentor, Baillie Construction Training Northern Ireland Community Interest Company (BCT NI CIC)

The Post Holder: Sandra McMurrán

A passion for helping others, combined with creative flair, led Sandra McMurrán to her current role as a tutor and mentor.

Give a brief outline of your career to date.

I joined a Youth Training Programme when I was 16 and spent two months dabbling in joinery, bricklaying, upholstery, and painting and decorating. It was in painting and decorating where I found my calling. My careers officer at the time asked if I'd be interested in applying for an apprenticeship at Feldon Training, which opened the door to a three-year employment opportunity with Toni McCallion working in police stations, army barracks, schools, fire stations and hospitals. I then attended Northern Regional College (NRC) and finished my NVQ levels 1, 2 and 3 in advanced craft, and received the Challenge Cup for being the first woman in Northern Ireland to qualify in my area. After this, I spent some time working with larger firms before starting my own painting and decorating firm, Woman's Touch in 2005. It ran until 2021, and I am now working as a Tutor-Mentor at BCT NI CIC.

What was your favourite subject at school?

Art. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but I knew it would be something creative.

Did you go on to further/higher education, if so what did you study and where?

I left school the day before I turned 16 but did return to NRC to take my NVQs.

How did you get into your area of work?

Three years ago, I decided to change my career path, working towards my essential skills and teaching award. I worked in Stockton-on-Tees in England for a period however, when Covid hit, I began teaching painting and decorating online. Travelling back and forth from England to Belfast every fortnight became difficult during the pandemic and so I returned home where I took up my current teaching and mentoring role at BCT NI.

Is this what you always wanted to do?

While running my own business and employing several male and female decorators was rewarding, my current role gives me the opportunity to support young people not only in gaining skills, but in gaining the self-esteem and confidence to live worthwhile lives. That's very special and I'm super proud of my students.

Were there any particular essential qualifications or experience needed?

A deep knowledge and appreciation of painting and decorating, for starters. But also, the ability to empathise with young people who perhaps aren't sure what they want to do with their lives – I've walked in those shoes.

Are there alternative routes into the job?

The Pathways program and evening classes can be the start of a new journey for anyone considering such a job. My role has developed so quickly working with BCT NI, and the outcomes from working with the youth of Belfast has been just amazing, whether it's getting employers on board to take on some of our wonderful students or seeing their development first-hand.

What are the main personal skills your job requires?

Having empathy and understanding of the challenges that young people face. Being friendly, approachable and open-minded and a good listener too. These skills are needed for mentoring which is a significant aspect of the role. Also, a willingness to make mistakes and learn from them.

What does a typical day entail?

A typical day at BCT NI consists of lesson planning, workshop practical lessons, liaising with employers regarding placement of students and supporting students in day to day tasks.

What are the best and most challenging aspects of the job?

Watching my students grow and seeing their mindset change in a positive way. They do not get paid to attend the sessions; they come of their own accord, while also encouraging their friends to join. It's

such an amazing and rewarding job... until I have to keep on top of my paperwork! There are not enough hours in the day, supporting these young men and women is stretching, but well worth it.

Why is what you do important?

Our work creates a future for young people who very often are completely disengaged from society when they come to us. With a little commitment and dedication, we can turn their world around, and that's important work.

How has Covid-19 impacted your business/role?

We did not close our doors once during the lockdowns. Our work

was deemed essential by government and, given the impact Covid has had on mental health – particularly the mental health of our young people – it has only brought me closer to the students.

What adjustments have you had to make?

Social distancing was a bit of a pain. When I meet students for the first time, I like to give them a reassuring pat on the shoulder, as it helps build that connection.

What advice would you give anyone looking to follow a similar career path?

Like I always say at BCT NI, start small to build big. There is a skills gap in the trades, particularly

painting and decorating at present, so there are lots of opportunities. I could not imagine my life without my students. I genuinely love my job. I don't do it for the money, it helps of course, but I do what I do to help change lives.

If you weren't doing this what would you like to do?

If I wasn't to continue in this role at BCT NI, I'd like to continue mentoring and supporting the youth of Belfast. Perhaps in the line of fostering, especially for this 15-22 age group.

What is the one piece of advice you would give to yourself on your first day?

Keep it simple. And always carry a notepad.

Describe your ideal day off.

My ideal day off is to head to the Wild Geese parachute centre, put my parachute kit on, and go jump out of a perfectly good plane. I do love spending time out with my own children, who just love to run rings around me, as well as looking after their dog and parrot – I have no idea how that happened!

And finally, what's the key to any successful job search?

The key to any successful job search is putting pen to paper. Sometimes who we are on paper is not always in line with our thoughts, I believe taking time to write things down teaches us a lot about ourselves. Believe in yourself, no job is out of reach.

Sandra McMurrán with a student at BCT NI CIC



“My current role gives me the opportunity to support young people not only in gaining skills, but in gaining the self-esteem and confidence to live worthwhile lives.”