

# Lifelong learning with Type 1

**Deborah Condon** speaks to primary school teacher Mairéad Parker about everyday lessons learned while living with Type 1, becoming a FreeStyle Libre ambassador and starting a family



When Mairéad Parker opened a Christmas present from her fiancé a few years ago, she was not expecting to find a FreeStyle Libre glucose monitoring system.

"It didn't seem like a very romantic present but looking back, it was the best present because I had been living in a land of guessing until then," she says.

Now a primary school teacher in her early 30s, Mairéad, who is originally from Westmeath but now lives in Dublin, was four years old when she developed Type 1 diabetes.

It was the summer before she was due to start school and her main symptoms were tiredness and an unquenchable thirst.

"I was really dehydrated so I was going to the sink in the bathroom to drink water because I could reach that tap. The

GP suggested that it might be diabetes so I was brought to hospital in Mullingar where it was confirmed," she recalls.

While she does not remember the hospital and those early days, she does remember all the equipment and the strict regime.

"You took insulin in the morning and at night, and you had set mealtimes. You took a set ratio of insulin no matter what you ate – it's a whole different world now. Now, I know how to carb count and there is so much more flexibility, but it wasn't like that back then," she says.

She became used to injections and because they were in the morning and night, they didn't impact on her day-to-day life. However, she admits that her control "wasn't great" during her teens and when she went to college.

## Guesswork

"There was a lot of guesswork. Even though I was living with it, I didn't understand a lot, such as carb counting, and then college was the real eye-opener. I went to university in Galway so I moved out of home and was managing things myself.

"It was kind of a double life where you are doing a lot of things you want to do and doing your best not to let diabetes stand in your way, but by ignoring it, you actually cause more problems," she says.

However, as she got older, she realised she wanted to educate herself more.

"Things that seem so far down the line when you are a teenager or in college, suddenly you realise, I am getting a little older and I really need to take care of myself," she explains.

A huge breakthrough came six years

## LIFE STORY

ago. During that year, as well as being given the present of the FreeStyle Libre, she also completed the DAFNE course and both of these had a huge impact on her.

Then, following encouragement from her fiancé and friends, she set up an Instagram page with the aim of possibly helping others with diabetes.

“It is amazing to speak to other people living with diabetes. I know myself that there is something special when you see someone else taking their insulin, using an insulin pump or checking their blood glucose readings,” she notes.

Her Instagram account allows her to raise awareness and encourage conversations about diabetes and she insists that “every day is a school day”.

“As a person with Type 1 diabetes you never stop learning,” she points out.

Her account has allowed her to connect with people both in Ireland and across the world.

“It’s such a supportive community and I love chatting to people, sharing experiences and learning from others. Diabetes is a constant learning curve and a bit of a rollercoaster, but I view my diabetes as something to be proud of,” she says.

### Ambassador

Mairéad is now a FreeStyle Libre ambassador and shares her experience with this to date.

“I was honoured to be asked to be an ambassador. I am one of two Irish ambassadors this year. I have written a few blog posts and recently did a podcast, episode 13, for the Freestyle Podcast Series. For me, it’s all about talking about diabetes and if I can even help one person through talking about it, that will be fantastic. For me, diabetes is my super power,” she says.

### Pregnancy and diabetes

And Mairéad certainly has plenty to talk about as she gave birth to her first child, Fionn, last September. While extra care is needed when pregnant with Type 1 diabetes, the Covid pandemic added an extra layer of complexity. However, Mairéad had a very positive experience in the Rotunda Hospital in



*Pictured above is Mairéad with her dog Ralph on Donabate beach, Co Dublin and below by Lake Plitvice in Croatia*



Dublin, where she describes the nurses as “absolutely fabulous”.

“Pregnancy with diabetes can vary so much but the FreeStyle Libre was a godsend. I used it to scan and check my blood glucose readings and every Monday I’d send these to the nurses. I could even input notes so I could include

reasons for some of the readings. They would then ring me to talk through the results. It was a really good service and the fact that I was in contact with the hospital every week was really reassuring,” she says.

She encourages anyone who is considering having a baby to speak to their diabetes team. There is lots you can do before becoming pregnant to help protect your own and your baby’s health, such as getting your HbA1c to a good level and taking a higher dose of folic acid.

### Knowledge is power

What ever stage of diabetes you are at, Mairéad firmly believe that “knowledge is power”. She also believes it is important to be open about the condition, although she admits it took her some time to reach that point.

“I didn’t want to say it to people because I didn’t want to be treated differently. I thought that if I didn’t talk about it, I’d be the same as everyone else but actually on reflection, the more I educated myself and understood the condition, I found it opened up a whole new world to me.

“It’s just really empowering to be able to talk to others and learn from others. Instagram was a huge step for me, putting myself out there, but if it helps even one person, then it is worth it,” she insists.

### Being open

Being open about the condition also extends to her worklife.

“I taught a student who had been newly diagnosed for two years. The student was quite shy about it so I was open about my diabetes. At break time, because the child was also using a FreeStyle Libre, we’d scan our blood glucose levels together.

“There is an element when you are younger that you want to be the same as everyone else, so I’d like to think that doing that made the child feel that they are not alone. I know if I had met someone when I was a child who had Type 1 diabetes, I would have been in awe”.

Mairéad’s Instagram handle is @type1\_muinteoir