

Sunday, 14 September 2008

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Circulation: 282 459

Area of Clip: 66877.00mm

Clip ID: 194102

BONDINGS

A sign of sisterly love

Ireland AM presenter Sinead Desmond and her deaf brother Conor want more support for sign language says Andrea Smith



IRELAND AM presenter Sinead Desmond and her younger brother Conor have a wonderful ability to communicate with one another, and the fact that Conor is profoundly deaf makes no difference to their close connection.

"We're fantastic confidantes for each other, and have a very emotionally open relationship," says the bubbly, warm Sinead. "We would tell each other an awful lot of things that we wouldn't even tell our friends."

They grew up in Enniskerry and Shankill, south of Dublin, and as the only children of the family, were close. Conor attended St Joseph's School for Deaf Boys, and recalls how Sinead was very protective of him growing up — most of the time!

"Sinead always made sure that I understood what people were saying to each other, and if I couldn't follow a conversation she would stop everything and explain what I'd missed," he says, adding that his parents Sylvia and Oliver strove hard to help him

to learn to communicate.

"She could also be very naughty and always had a twinkle in her eye. When I was about six and she was eight, she pushed me into the pond in St Stephen's Green on a freezing November day. She was laughing so much that I had to laugh with her, but Mum went crazy as my hearing aids got wet!"

"We were very happy kids," adds Sinead, "but we used to thump the hell out of one another, which was weird because Mum and Dad were hippies who didn't believe in corporal punishment at all, and there was Conor and I belting each other black and blue."

Conor went on to study fashion design for three years at Bradford College in the UK, while Sinead went to York University to study English, Drama, Television and Film.

"I loved my course," says Conor, "but found it tough being one of the few deaf students in a hearing college. The reality is that deaf people can never fully fit in with the hearing world because we are different, which was a difficult lesson to learn for me. I learned to accept who I was in the end, and now I have no problem with the fact that I am deaf — I am proud of it."

When Conor lost his interpreter in his final year at college after funding was withdrawn, he went over to Sinead every weekend and she would help him to go through his coursework. "Sinead has always been there for me, and if I ever need support in any way I always know I can go to her," he says. "She is very positive and always looks on the bright side of life, and has so much energy — I don't know where she gets it from."

After college, Sinead set up

a theatre company, and worked as a journalist for several years, before taking over as co-presenter of TV3's breakfast show, *Ireland AM*.

Conor is currently living in Kilkenny, where he works as an apprentice hairdresser in Kieran O'Gorman's salon. He communicates through lip-reading, and his deafness has never posed a problem with customers.

Sinead is full of admiration for the way Conor has dealt with the challenges in his life to date. While she is protective of him, the tables were turned when Sinead had a brain haemorrhage in June, from which, thankfully, she has recovered. "I was very glad to find Conor at my side as soon as I came around in Beaumont Hospital," she says, "He was an amazing support to me during my recovery."

For his part, Conor admits to getting an awful fright on hearing the news that his sister had been taken ill.

"It was an incredible shock for all of us, and I'm so, so, glad she survived," says Conor. "It would be the worst thing in the world for me to lose Sinead, as she's been an angel of a sister and I love her from the bottom of my heart! She is incredibly messy though, which drives me mad, as I'm a total neat freak. Her spare room is chaotic, full of all the clothes, shoes and jewellery she wears on *Ireland AM* and to events. I help her to organise it whenever I can, but it's always messy again within days!"

Conor and Sinead lead very different lives, but are always in touch with each other by text. Sinead is engaged to Davie Ryan from Cork, with whom Conor has a great rela-

tionship, and will be his groomsman at the nuptials in France next summer. Conor is gay, and is vice-president of the Deaf Society in Kilkenny, so he has a busy life there.

"I think Conor looks on me as the driven one, but he's the one out there organising fashion shows and social nights," says Sinead. "He's very artistic and creative, is very wise and incredibly astute, and is really good at giving me advice. Conor's gay, deaf and diabetic, so he has an awful lot on his plate to deal with, but he never moans. I have always been fiercely protective of him, even with his relationships, and if anyone hurts him, I'll be on the warpath."

Sinead and Conor recently fronted this year's Signing Week, which was established to highlight the needs of Ireland's deaf community.

Sinead regrets that she never learnt to sign, although she communicates with Conor through lip-reading and finger spelling. Most deaf people, an estimated 50,000 in Ireland, communicate through Irish Sign Language, and Sinead and Conor feel that its recognition by the Irish State would go a long way to helping the deaf community feel like an important and valued part of Irish society.

"Conor and I never miss a heartbeat with one another, but I'd love to be able to communicate with his friends through sign language," says Sinead. "I went to an Irish Deaf Society event once, and experienced being in the minority there. It was a shock to realise how Conor is in the minority in society every day of the week, and how difficult this must be for him."

The Irish Deaf Society. Tel: (01) 860-1878, or visit the website www.deaf.ie

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ON THE SAME WAVELENGTH: Brother and sister Conor and Sinead Desmond have always looked out for one another.