

PWCF SPOTLIGHT

OAK, Olly and Creepy the Bear: The Story of the Two Suitcases Film Week

By Gemma Kent, PWCF aged 15, Co Cork

For me, CF has meant a lot of different things growing up. When I was younger, it was just two letters that meant I had to take capsules before I ate something. Nothing special, no big deal, everyone else probably did it anyway. But when I started school, I realised it made me unique: I was the girl in the class who needed tablets when she ate. And that was seemingly all there was to it: tablets. In secondary school, it earned me a few glances at first but I think being honest really helped there — while in primary I never took my tablets out from beneath the table, in secondary I adapted the policy of just taking them like you would anything else. Let there be questions, because as soon as you're asked, you can answer, and then there's no more secrets. Pretty soon, you're making a show of your capsules in front of strangers just so you can share your story (a method that has yet to fail in striking up dinner conversation). CF also began to mean a lot more to me than just tablets. As I got older, I began to understand better what exactly it was and how it would affect me. Sometimes it was all a bit too much to take in. Sometimes I asked myself "Why me?" over and over again. But I guess as time goes on you come to accept it and move on. You can let CF rule your life, or you can rule it.

I first heard about Helium back in March 2012 when Helene Hugel, from Helium, contacted me and asked if I'd be interested in taking part in an "innovation day" through Skype. It was later on in July when I got in touch with Emma Eager, another member of Helium, who was interested in making an online forum for teenagers with chronic illnesses who had an interest in the arts. She told me that Helene had mentioned me and my love of creative writing and that she was wondering if I'd be interested in this project too. Writing is my life and I'm always looking for ways to improve and get experience; this project seemed like the perfect way to do this so there was no hesitation in saying yes! Following a number of emails between Emma and I, as well as ideas from other teens interested in the project, my entry for the name of the new site, "Iridescent Oak", was decided on and adapted as OAK (an acronym for **O**nline **A**rts **d**oc**K**).



With the website finally named and published, attention turned to the Film Week scheduled for the week of the 29th of November, not long away at all! I'd really enjoyed being a part of Helium's projects so far and I was keen to get involved in the film week too, but at first it looked like that might not happen...I was in third year at the time and the steady panic of the too-fast-approaching Junior Cert was setting in. This midterm was like catch-up time and I'd wanted to use it to get up-to-date on some schoolwork and revision. I was also going away on holidays for some of the week so I was already cutting it all quite tight. Fortunately, though, there was a way I could be in the two places at once...

Someone suggested that I take part in the brainstorming sessions during the week online, via Skype. Now I'll admit, I was a bit sceptical about it all at first. I'd had my fair share of using Skype before and it's not always the most reliable of things. Maybe it's down to a slow internet connection, but calls through Skype can often be difficult to hear and, more often than not, have a time-delay. But it was either be there on Skype or not be there at all, so there wasn't much that could be done in the end!

So it was decided, I was going to be Gemma the Online Girl for this project! When the 30th of October finally came along I was up and raring to go for 11am. Siobhán, another one of the mentors for this project, called and (after the happy revelation that my laptop had a built-in microphone) we got to

work! Being the shy person that I am, I wanted to stick with just a call for the project and not use the video link. This meant that the closest thing everyone on the other side of the screen had to a picture of me was my Skype Profile Picture at the time: my cat Olly (who went on to play his own role in the film, but more on that later).

After introductions, we each shared "Something you would not guess about me". You'd really be surprised what some people said! Of course, I remember what I said, that I wanted to be a writer when I was older and that I was already working on my first novel. To be able to just say that in front of a group of people with no hesitation was a whole new experience for me because it's not something I normally do. Looking back on it, I can see how the project really boosted my confidence in that way. Following this, we discussed some goals and potential challenges all of which we put on what we called a 'Graffiti Wall'. At the end of the film week, we looked back on this wall to see if we had reached our goals and conquered our challenges (I'm glad to say we certainly did).

After this, we started on an activity that I remember really enjoying: storytelling. Ben Murnane, another one of the mentors, oversaw the activity. We each picked an item from the bag (one of the teenagers taking part took one out on my behalf) and then invented a story around it. One girl on the project picked Ben's old teddy bear and came up with the idea that he was an evil teddy bear who went on a killing spree. I don't know if any of us knew it then, but that actually became the basis for our whole film.

Next day, the Two Suitcases studio was converted into a World Café. Now for those of you who have never heard of it, a World Café is a really interesting and clever way to brainstorm ideas for a film while also getting everyone's input. Basically, as many tables as are needed are set up and a small group of, say, four or five people sit at each table. They discuss ideas based on the theme of the table (my first table, for example, was art). Then, after a certain length of time, everyone — bar one person from each table — gets up and moves to another table. It's the job of the person left behind to inform the new arrivals of what was being discussed before. In this way, everyone gets to "bring something to the table" and lots of different aspects of a film can be brainstormed



Cast and crew with Gemma online to the left.



Editing session on Skype.

at once. Personally, I think it was the small group at each table that really helped a lot of us quieter people come out of our shells! At this stage, the teddy bear idea had been decided and now it was just a matter of what exactly we were going to have him do.

I suppose the only major downside to being an online participant was the fact that my involvement had a limit. While the other teenagers were there, in the flesh, all day, I was at home and couldn't well spend my whole day at my laptop! This was especially the case when it came to our small holiday. Of course, the crew understood exactly where I was coming from and there was no trouble in not being able to make an appearance on Thursday. Despite this, I still wanted to turn up one last time, so I made it my goal to squeeze in a few hours while we were away.

And I must say, I'm very glad I did. Following our World Café everyone met up at the one table again to finalise some things. What our first scene would be, characters we'd need, and so on. One idea that was being thrown around was that of a Cyber Bully featuring in the film — played by yours truly! Now, as I mentioned, I'm not exactly a very outgoing person and the idea of actually acting in the film was a bit daunting. I didn't want to say no though, so I just went along with it. I never really imagined that two days later I would actually be taking part in the filming!

Either way, it came about that I ended up getting my first role in a film (I can't remember exactly when I agreed to it all, but I remember knowing I was needed for recording on the Friday anyway)! My character, Stacey, is the Cyber Bully in the film. Her Skype profile picture is my cat, Olly, so that's how Olly got to play his part for the film in the end! Now I've got to say, the actual filming was one of the best parts of the week. Not only did we have a really good laugh doing it, but there was a really great feeling about finally being able to put all that planning into action. However there were, as there always is, some ups and downs with filming. What I found the hardest was (unsurprisingly) using Skype. As I said, Skype isn't always the most reliable of things and when it comes to online acting it really doesn't make life easy. Between losing the connection just before my cue was given and sometimes not being able to hear my cue full stop, it could be pretty frustrating at times. But we all kept our heads about us and got through it! Funnily enough, it turned out that my somewhat-faulty connection wasn't as big a deal as I'd thought. About two weeks later Emma Eager, along with Zachary Cole were in touch with me again to get a few more recordings of some of my lines. These, thank goodness, turned out much better than the first try and were the ones used in the film.

The icing on the cake for me will always be the screening itself. There was something really brilliant about finally meeting all these wonderful people, with whom I'd been working with for so long over the internet, face-to-face at last. 'The Internet Girl' had finally shed her cloak of mystery and now people finally had a face to put to my name other than Olly's! The feedback for the film was immense and really positive all round. Creepy the bear had put a smile on everyone's face (and

hopefully made them think twice about where they left their childhood bears from now on!) and the whole crew was really proud.

Our next film week starts in October (during midterm) in the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) in Dublin. In the run-up to this, we'll be using OAK to brainstorm ideas for the next film. It looks like we're going with an internet based film about RPGs (role-play games) so if this is an area that interests you, we'd love you to get in touch! OAK provides a great opportunity to get involved, especially if you don't want to — or can't — be there for the actual week. If you do decide to get involved then you can contact Emma at communications@helium.ie or you can sign up at OAK (www.onlineartsdock.com) and get in-touch from there.



Courtyard at IMMA, where the next film week will take place.

Just to quickly mention OAK, it is, as I said, a site designed for children with chronic illnesses like CF. It's a place where you can share pictures and documents and get in touch with other people who are in similar circumstances to you. You can choose to share your story with others or simply set aside your illness and show off your talents! For children with CF in particular, it's a great way to get to know other PWCF in a safe environment where you can stop worrying about passing on your germs! Either way, it's really worth a look if you're interested and I, personally, would love the chat so do track me down if you join!

So that's the story of our 2012 Film Week and what we've got planned for 2013. As for what I've planned for my own future? Well, nothing is set in stone yet anyway! I could be a best-selling author or a journalist or a secretary for all I know! Fingers crossed that I'll *finally* get that book written and you'll see it on a window shop display in your local bookstore in years to come. Who knows? In the meantime, all I *do* know for certain is that I don't intend to let CF stop me trying any of it.