

The oldest apprentice, bar nun

At 72, Helen Connolly's enthusiasm has made her a star student in health and social care. She also happens to be a nun which, she tells Joseph Lee, helps keep her out of mischief



Sister Helen's day begins with prayers at 5am before she begins work at the care home in the grounds of her convent.

Photograph: Teri Pengilly

By Joseph Lee

MEET SISTER Helen – England's oldest apprentice and a star pupil at the age of 72.

She has travelled the world and is now aiming at new horizons as one of thousands of adult apprentices honing workplace skills.

Traditionally the preserve of the under-25s, apprenticeships have been available to older people for three years.

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Sister Helen – Helen Connolly – is on a two-year health and social care course which finishes in January 2009. She took the opportunity at a time of life when most people are looking to put their feet up. But she has no plans to retire. She is too fond of her regime of 5am prayers before her day's work

begins at a residential care home. "It keeps me out of mischief," she said.

Home is a 19th-century, red-brick Franciscan Convent in Braintree, Essex, complete with a chapel designed by the architect of Westminster Cathedral, John Francis Bentley. The residential care home where she works is on the same site, looking after nuns in their old age as well as elderly men and women from the local community.

Like any apprentice, her work is monitored by an assessor who identifies any training needs. But with 27 years of experience at the care home, she is rated as a star pupil.

Not everything comes easily, however, and Sister Helen admitted the numeracy portion of the basic skills requirements is a struggle – the last time she studied maths was about 60 years ago.

Despite her experience, she says the apprenticeship course is helping her work and proving to be a motivating challenge.

"A lot of the other girls (nuns at the convent) were doing the course and I realised I hadn't done it and I

thought it would be an encouragement to them," she said. "It puts more knowledge behind your experience, it keeps the mind active and it's a great interest to have."

Kit Walton, Sister Helen's assessor from JHP Training, said circumstances in the care industry, where homes are under increasing Government pressure to ensure their workers are all trained, meant older apprentices are more likely.

Her next oldest trainee is 63. Sister Helen was born in County Galway in Ireland. Her early years were blighted by chronic tonsillitis, which meant she was not well enough to attend school until the age of nine.

She said her family's Catholicism had been a comfort during her illness and that prompted her decision at 14 to attend the juniorate school, which prepares girls to become nuns.

Her first posting was to Rome, where she lived for 11 years, eventually rising to a position where she coached novices.

Later she returned to Ireland, which proved to be a culture shock

after living in the centre of the Italian capital, before eventually coming to live in Essex.

Sister Helen's appointments were determined by the Rome-based Institute of the Missionary Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, which runs the convents.

It has missions based in places as far afield as Bolivia, Peru, Egypt and north America.

Sister Helen had been based at Clacton-on-Sea, Essex, where the convent was attached to a nursery school. She studied at Colchester College for a City and Guilds qualification, the first time she had taken public examinations because her juniorate school did not offer external exams.

In 1981, she moved to the convent in Braintree. She has remained there ever since – with the exception of a sabbatical trip to visit missions in Australia and Papua New Guinea for four months.

"I saw the women in Papua New Guinea go off with their fish hooks and nets," she recalled with a smile. "The men would just be sitting watching while women worked."