



**BY BLOSSOM CO-FOUNDER AUVEEN BELL**

**BLOSSOM PARENTS SAY:**

**“THERE ARE NO OTHER CAMPS I COULD BRING MY DAUGHTER TO, IT’S A GREAT EXPERIENCE AND ALLOWS ME TO DO THINGS WITH A YOUNGER SIBLING.”**

**“MY CHILD WOULD BE VERY ISOLATED WITHOUT THE BLOSSOM CAMPS.”**



**THANKS TO A GRANT FROM  
 THE IRELAND FUNDS, WE  
 WERE ABLE TO RECENTLY LAUNCH  
 BLOSSOM BUDDIES WHICH  
 ENABLES TEENAGERS TO DEVELOP  
 INDEPENDENT LIFE SKILLS.**

AS MUM TO THREE CHILDREN, I JUST WANT MY KIDS TO BE THE BEST THEY CAN BE. BASICALLY I WANT THEM TO HAVE FUN, TO LEARN AND TO MAKE FRIENDS. BUT FOR MY SON RORY WHO HAS AN INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY, THIS PROVED QUITE A CHALLENGE PARTICULARLY DURING SCHOOL HOLIDAYS.

There was no one knocking on our door asking him to come out and play. He had never been asked on a playdate. Instead of wondering which summer camp he should go to, my difficulty was simply finding a camp that could cater to his needs. This led to very long empty summer holidays for a child like Rory, not to mention us as his parents.

So along with my friend Orla Crowe whose son Max has Down Syndrome, we decided to set up Blossom Ireland in 2010 to bridge the gap between the available public services and the actual needs of families like ours. We wanted our boys to have the same opportunities as our other kids. We wanted them to go to a camp, to make friends but above all to have fun just like every other child. Because they deserved nothing less.

So our first summer camp was held in August 2011 and we had 22 children with special needs between the ages of 8 – 12. We now run Blossom Ireland Discovery Camps throughout the year and have over 45 children registered with us. Our camps are about providing just enough supports in the right environment to enable children with an intellectual disability to engage in activities to the best of their ability.

As the children grow, we try to grow with them. We currently have children up to the age of 16. We are very conscious of the fact that it wouldn't be appropriate for a 16 year old to be participating in the same programme as an 8 year old so this has led us to develop a new service called Blossom Buddies.

If our Blossom teens want to go to the cinema or visit the local coffee shop they generally need support to do this. Typically this support comes in the form of a parent or sibling which means that either the young person never gets to experience an activity or make a friend independently, or they simply don't attend the activity. Our aim is to support them to undertake the activities that other children access easily.

Currently we operate only in Dublin but we plan over the coming years to expand our services throughout Ireland. We see our Blossom Discovery Camps almost as the incubator phase where we give the children confidence by providing an environment that is paced just right to allow them to succeed. It encourages friendships and helps build self-esteem. The Blossom Buddies Program is very much about building on that confidence and enabling our young people with intellectual disabilities to become active and valued members of their local communities.