

How I Got Here: Jonathan Campbell



LyIT lecturer and St Johnston man, Jonathan Campbell, with his first year Games Programming class

Computer wiz and marathon man

Jonathan Campbell is a lecturer at Letterkenny Institute of Technology where he teaches the subjects in the computer games area and computer programming.

The lecturer also does research in pattern recognition and machine learning and supervises a PhD student in that topic and works with a local company (Opt2Vote in Derry) on novel methods for electronic counting of votes.

Jonathan grew up on a farm just outside St Johnston and attended Castletown National School. His father passed away when he was eight and then Jonathan attended boarding school in Dublin.

After completing his second level education at Dickensian School Dublin, Jonathan was accepted to Trinity College to study electronic engineering.

Jonathan's main hobbies now are athletics and cycling, and his job. He maintains the website for Finn Valley Athletics Club (www.finnvalleyac.com) and he is now trying to get to the stage where he cycles to work most of the time (21 miles each way).

Some of Jonathan's proudest moments were playing cricket and athletics. He won some national medals in the marathon with Raheny Shamrock and later with Finn Valley.

In 1991 Jonathan was third in the Masters in the Dublin Marathon behind Niall Cusack which gave him the Finn Valley AC marathon record, which he held for the next ten years.

FACT FILE

Name: Jonathan Campbell

Hometown: St Johnston

Job title: Lecturer

Age: 58

Education: Castletown NS, Boarding School in Dublin, Trinity College Dublin

What was your first job?

My first job was as a technician in the Digital Equipment Company in Galway in 1973; Digital Galway was probably the beginnings of the Celtic Tiger.

How has your career developed since graduating from university?

After Digital in Galway, I went into the research department of an electronic company in the south of England.

After seven years I came back to Ireland and worked first for the civil service on a project to make maps from satellite pictures.

Then I worked for nine years for a small high technology startup called CAPTEC. In 1989 I was lucky enough to get an academic job with University of Ulster (Magee College, Derry).

While at Magee I studied to gain a doctorate. After that I spent some

time in the computer science department at Queen's University Belfast.

In 2001 I came back to Donegal and the Computing Department in Letterkenny Institute of Technology.

You have taught a variety computing courses, but how does teaching compare to working in the professional world?

The main difference between a lecturer's job and industry is that as a lecturer you are largely your own boss.

Sure, you have to turn up on time for your classes, but that's only a small part of the work and it's your own responsibility to see that the real work gets done.

Teaching is nice in that you are dealing with young people, and that's a good way of trying to stay young.

When I was at CAPTEC in Dublin we did a lot of work for the European Space Agency, the European equivalent of NASA.

That turned out to be very good preparation for the computer games courses that we now run in

LyIT. Developing computer games is a bit like rocket science, maybe even a bit harder.

Who showed you the ropes/has taught you the most in your career so far?

I have been exceptionally lucky to have had excellent teachers and colleagues. There were good teachers at Castletown National School. The Trinity College engineering degree was a good preparation for lifelong

learning.

That's something we try to do in our courses in LyIT, prepare students for the next forty years, rather than concentrating on the current fashion.

There were some very bright people in Plessey (the electronics company in England that I worked for) and they taught me a lot. I owe much to many colleagues at University of Ulster and at Queen's.

Fred Kennedy of CAPTEC taught me a lot about business, he was a hard but very honest businessman; building a very successful technology startup in the 1980s was not easy.

In athletics, I was lucky enough to have come under the influence of the Olympians Pat Hooper of Raheny Shamrock and his brother Dick.

When I came back to Donegal, I had great training partners in Finn Valley AC and Letterkenny AC.

The world of computers is always developing, are you constantly updating your personal skills and knowledge?

Yes, another hobby, and a vice, is buying the latest books on my area in computing, about 3,000 Euro per annum. I've read some of them!

I don't like being too far from my computers, now with broadband and cheap computers it's great to be on-line 24/7.

I have five computers in my house, and any of them would have cost many million of dollars when

I first started in computing in 1973. It's sad I know, but I live most of my life online.

If you could do any other job in the world, what would it be?

It's hard to imagine a better job than I have, living close to St Johnston, working with great colleagues, teaching great students.

Becoming a lecturer was always my ambition and a lecturing job in Donegal is too good to be true.

It certainly beats sorting potatoes and snedding turnips.

Any future ambitions?

We have been working hard for the past few years developing a computer games programme at LyIT.

It would be nice to see a crop of good graduates from that degree leaving and fostering the development of a digital entertainment industry here in Donegal.

Dundee did it, there's no reason why Letterkenny cannot do it. When one of them forms a

company, maybe they'll offer me a job as a programmer! If anyone wants to see what we are doing, we have an Open Day at the LyIT on November 16th.

Sporting ambitions?

It's unlikely that I'll ever run another marathon nor play cricket for St Johnston.

I'm a spectator now. It would be great to see Harps challenging in the Premier Division once again and St Johnston back on top in the North West Cricket League.