

Longstone

NARRATOR: Bethany Firth might at first glance seem like any other teenager: using the Internet, going to college, texting friends. But look a little closer and you'll find a fascinating story. Because Bethy, who has a moderate learning difficulty, is also an outstanding athlete, who won gold in the pool at the London Paralympics 2012.

WOMAN: (OVER PA) Take your mark.

(BUZZER SOUNDS)

COMMENTATOR: Bethany Firth for Ireland in Lane Six. It could be an incredible moment, she's still in front. Can she hold on? She's been trained--

COMMENTATOR 2: Got to do it.

COMMENTATOR: Bethany Firth from County Down has won a gold medal for Ireland! What a moment.

MRS. FIRTH: Bethany, when she was two, she fell in a very big swimming pool. It did put the fear into her. From then on, she wouldn't go near the water.

BETHANY FIRTH: Basically, the whole swimming thing started three years ago where I hated water and I didn't want to swim. I hated everything about it. And my school decided that it was compulsory lessons for me to swim.

JOHN MCLLMOYLE: Longstone caters for pupils from four to 16 years of age. They've got moderate learning difficulties, and a wide range of special needs. Our ethos is to provide a safe and secure environment where the pupils will develop to their full potential. We've a very broad and balanced curriculum with a wide range of extracurricular activities.

JEROME STARRS: Bethy started swimming as part of the PE curriculum here at Longstone. She was a little tentative at the start, but with some encouragement we managed to get her into the pool. And from a very early stage, it was easy to spot that Bethy had loads of natural talent.

BETHANY FIRTH: So they used to take me to the pool, and I used to like, pretend I had forgotten my swimsuit and stuff which I actually hadn't, like.

MRS. FIRTH: We got a plan together that I would pack her bags so underneath everything was another swimming costume and another towel, so if she then did forget her original swim costume and towel, he could still get her in.

(LAUGHS)

And just chucked me in. I think it was like, little games and stuff. They used to, like, say, "Go find that." Like, you know, those wee chubby things or something, they used to chuck them in and I had to go find it, which was quite scary but you got used to it, and it started to become more of a game than actually something I would be doing. And I never thought I would get to where I am now from it.

JEROME STARRS: After a couple of months at swimming, we decided to enter her into a competition run by Disability Sport NI. So she was entered into about four different events: a variety of breaststroke, backstroke, fly,

and she came away at the end with a handful of gold medals. So everybody was absolutely delighted at an early stage.

BETHANY FIRTH: After a few weeks, I started to love it and I just wanted to learn more and more about it, and they helped me to learn more and they pushed me and encouraged me, which was great.

JOHN MCLLMOYLE: Bethy is an excellent example of our successes. Her potential was recognised and developed, and she has matured into a well-rounded, caring, considerate young lady, and we're very, very proud of her.

MRS. FIRTH: Well, a typical day for Bethany starts at 04:00 a.m with the alarm going off. I check she's got her bags, and by half four, we're out the door and on the road. It is about a 45-minute to 50-minute drive up to the pool. So she arrives at the pool for half five. She does stretches, and then she's in the water. And then two hours in the water. Then after she's done that, she comes out and does more stretches for half an hour. Gets herself ready and usually leaves the pool about half eight. She then heads to Tech at nine o'clock, and is usually there till about half three, four o'clock. And then from there she either goes back for another two hour session of swimming, or she heads for physio and gym. So every single day she is training twice a day except for Saturday, that is her day off.

NELSON LINDSAY: Well, Bethany entered a school gala, and they said she should take the sport up, or they thought she should try the sport. So she joined our club. She could swim, but her strokes obviously needed a lot of work. And then, when she moved into the squad below mine, the coaches there said to me about this girl, she had a disability, but she trained very hard and I had a look at her and she certainly, you know, she was the best swimmer in the squad. So she got a time to move up to our squad. And really, you couldn't have an easier swimmer to work with. She really tries her best every session. She tries to do what she's told, and she's very, very conscientious. Never misses a session, usually one of the first through the door in the morning. And she's really applied herself and I think she's just surprised us all, how rapid her progress has been.

MRS. FIRTH: Bethy is at Tech in Ards and she does Work Link. Now, Work Link involves her learning a career, plus also doing Maths and English. She's doing catering as her chosen choice for this year, but she is hoping to move to sports come September. Now, with the maths her next aim is to get a GCSE Maths, and, fortunate for us, Mr. Brokbank, from Longstone School, who we still keep in contact with, has said he will help her with her GCSE maths. So she gets private tuition once a week with him.

MARK BROKBANK: I suppose for her to study in sports science, really, she needs her skill set increased and improved upon and the best way of doing that would be to study the Maths, English and Science subjects. We decided to go along with CCEA syllabus simply because of the topics that are in it. It's very much geared towards real life skills that children need for the world of employment, and it really links into that very well. And the resources that are available through CCEA we found best suited Bethy's approach to learning. I mean, she's very much a success story of how, in Longstone, our approach is very much child-centred. It's very much tailoring resources and teaching strategies and methods to individual children, which I think at Longstone we're very skilled at doing. I mean, that's not taking away from Bethy. But Bethy's tenacity and her work ethic is of an adult nature. It's exceptional. Once she has her goal set on something, she goes for it, and there's no stopping her.

NELSON LINDSAY: She's very, very good at finding her own ways round her disability. And when she came up to us first, you couldn't give her anything longer than 200 meters. That's eight lengths of a pool like we have. Or she would lose count, so you had to put her behind somebody else in the lane. As she got faster, I moved her up lanes, swimming behind faster swimmers. And now you can give her sets of 400s, which are 16 lengths in a swim. She'll count perfectly, she'll keep track, and she couldn't have done that when she came up to us first. So she's found her own way of keeping track.

S-14 is the only category in the Paralympic Games where the competitors have an intellectual impairment. And this is for swimmers who have too high an IQ to swim in Special Olympics, but have some sort of learning difficulty which makes it more difficult for them to acquire skills and train.

JEROME STARRS: Just because Bethy has a moderate learning difficulty, it doesn't mean that she wasn't able to excel in some area, and for Bethy it just happened to be sport. Other children might go on, it may be music, it may be drama. It could be English, it could be maths. And Bethy, we were lucky enough to spot early on, that her talent was going to lie in sport.

MRS. FIRTH: The support from Longstone was phenomenal, especially when they did discover her talent. They really did push her, and if they hadn't started her in that pool, she never would have got to London, and Jerome was the first phone call I made when she won that gold because it was Longstone and him that got her that gold and got her that recognition.

JEROME STARRS: Bethy's a shining example of what it is to be a true sports person. She's fiercely competitive. But underneath it all, always gracious, and genuinely wants her competitors to do as well as herself.

BETHANY FIRTH: Well, right now I'm training for Canada in the summer. And then after that, it's Commonwealth. And then hopefully Rio again, and then after that I'm not sure what's going to happen with my swimming and stuff, but hopefully it'll carry on. But if it doesn't, I hope to become, like, a swimming ambassador or something. Something that I can show others what I've done, and then they can look up and hopefully do the same.