EagleEyes: Building Bridges in Northern Ireland

When Christine Jendoubi arrived at Boston College in May 2001, she expected to learn more about the American political system and specifically how education policy is executed on the local, state, and federal levels. What she didn’t expect was to learn about two assistive technologies that are changing the lives of students with severe disabilities both here in the US and abroad.

As part of a delegation of 12 education policy makers from Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, Christine came to Boston to participate in a congressionally-funded program designed to help leaders of nations emerging from conflict promote peace through effective government. On the last day of her visit, Christine and other visiting officials were invited to the Campus School for a demonstration of the EagleEyes and Camera Mouse technologies.

Carl Savage of Northern Ireland’s Special Education Branch relays the story, “The inspectors were totally bowled over by technology…Christine said that the whole trip would have been worth it just for EagleEyes.”

Eighteen months later, Northern Ireland has just secured funding for 26 Camera Mouse systems and has recently signed a licensing agreement for the EagleEyes technology. Officials expect that the technology will roll out in schools beginning in January and February.

Professor Tom Hachey, Executive Director of Irish Programs at Boston College, comments on the fortuitous connection. “We’d love to see the technology brought down to the Irish Republic…and of course, we’d love a chance to work with Jim Gips and Phil DiMattia again.”

This collaboration between the Irish Institute, the Lynch School of Education and the Computer Science Department proves once again that the strength of an academic institution lies not just in the achievements of individuals and individual departments, but also in an atmosphere that promotes the exchange of ideas and the synergies that evolve from them.

Just as EagleEyes has served as a platform for cooperation within BC, it is hoped that the technology will foster cooperation in Northern Ireland. By tackling special education challenges together, school officials invest in the promise of a better future for students with severe disabilities.

Sandy Nelson: Keys to Success

Be not afraid of growing slowly, be afraid only of standing still.

-Chinese Proverb

While 41-year old Sandy Nelson has been out of school for twenty years, she’s not afraid of learning new things, especially when it comes to Camera Mouse technology. Dennis Collins, Sandy’s brother-in-law, found out about Camera Mouse through an article in the Boston Herald a little over a year ago. Anxious for Sandy to try the technology, Dennis brought Sandy to her alma mater, the Campus School at Boston College.

Much to Sandy’s delight, several Campus School staff members were still working there and immediately remembered Sandy from her time as a student twenty years ago. Once put on the Camera Mouse system, witnesses say that Sandy, a spastic quadriplegic woman with severe cerebral palsy, picked up the Camera Mouse technique very quickly.

What are the keys to Sandy’s success? First, Sandy has identified the best technology for her. Because she has both horizontal and vertical control over her head movements, Camera Mouse technology suits her perfectly. She also has very supportive family members who are anxious for Sandy to succeed in finding activities which promote her independence and individuality.

(See Sandy Nelson, page 2)
Sharif Tai '03 has a way with computers. And, as it turns out, he has a way with people, too. Often seen in the computer lab on the fourth floor of Fulton Hall, Sharif plays an integral role in bringing technical support to the EagleEyes Program. During his time at BC, he has worked with virtually all EagleEyes and Camera Mouse users, setting up hardware, installing new applications and making sure that equipment is set for optimal performance for each user.

While Sharif’s involvement has already made a lasting contribution to the program, the BC senior is currently working on leaving an even greater legacy behind him. This legacy consists of his thesis project that involves the development of network applications that enable two EagleEyes or Camera Mouse users to work together through a direct connection over the Internet.

While the application is currently functional, it’s also a work in progress and Sharif will continue to add features over the next several months. He also aims to make it easier for future undergraduates involved with the program to add on to the application. Through this continuous improvement, Sharif hopes to enhance and expand the way EagleEyes and Camera Mouse users can connect with their world.

When asked how EagleEyes has affected his experience at BC, Sharif responds, “Working on the EagleEyes Project has been great. I actually get to see people using the technology and this has been very gratifying. Seeing how the technology helps people who aren’t able to express themselves in traditional ways gives more meaning to my studies.”
Film Studies Program Premieres “Michael’s Eagle Eyes”

EagleEyes has recently spread its wings into BC’s Fine Arts Department in yet another cross-disciplinary collaboration between BC Faculty and the EagleEyes Project. On September 26th, BC’s Film Studies Program premiered “Michael’s Eagle Eyes,” a documentary about the life of Michael Nash, EagleEyes user and recent graduate of Marshfield High School.

The film marks the beginning of a series of films entitled “I’m in Here!” Co-producers John Michalczyk and Ronald Marsh hope that the series will provide a platform for people whose stories have traditionally gone untold.

Most people who know Michael Nash’s story, know the story second hand. What is unique about “Michael’s Eagle Eyes” is that Michael contributed to the film and it’s the woven narration of Michael’s words throughout the film that makes it so compelling. The audience is offered a glimpse of what it’s like to be a very able-minded person trapped in a severely disabled body.

Another moving aspect the film captures is the monumental support Michael receives from his family and his personal teacher, Maureen Gates. Michael’s mom, Kathy Nash, describes how, shortly after Michael’s birth, she was told that her son should be institutionalized. Kathy refused to let this happen. Her perseverance in insisting that her son live a life of inclusion, and that he achieve to the best of his ability, is a tribute to all moms everywhere.

Through the film “Michael’s Eagle Eyes” the BC Film Studies Program effectively captures a day in the life of Michael Nash and his struggle to interact with the world. Once again, Michael proves himself to be a source of inspiration for BC faculty, students, the community at large - and now filmmakers, too.

What’s it like to be an EagleEyes Buddy?

The BEAT talks with undergraduates Gaby Ghafari ’04 and Pete Olinits ’04, veteran Buddies of three years to find out!

BEAT: How did you get started as a buddy?
GABY: I started volunteering with EagleEyes right after Spring Break my freshman year. I had found out about it through the 48 hours program.
PETE: I found out about EagleEyes at the beginning of freshman year from Dr. Lambert and knew I wanted to get involved as soon as I could.

BEAT: Was it tough getting started?
GABY: It was a little shocking at first. I hadn’t had much previous exposure to this [severely disabled] population.
PETE: At first it was a little intimidating, but I soon got used to it.
GABY: Before seeing the students on the system I don’t think I realized that they had such a cognitive process. For the most part, we can’t see what’s going on inside their minds until they’re on the EagleEyes system.

BEAT: Can you describe a memorable session?
PETE: Okay. It was my freshman year. Things were crazy and school work was really getting to me. I met with my buddy playing very well against his guy buddy, but he practically refused to play against me. I think he thought it would be ungentlemannly to beat a girl! That action really gives you a glimpse into the type of person that this student is, not only his EagleEyes abilities, but his personality.
PETE: Yeah, there’s so much inside [these students] that’s just waiting to get out. EagleEyes has helped so many people realize that there is much more than just a person in a chair, but a life with real decisions and emotions.

BEAT: Do you feel that your experience as a Buddy has changed you in any way?
GABY: Definitely. Being a buddy has made me very conscious of the way I relate to people with disabilities. It helps remind me that regardless of whom you’re talking to, you should talk to them, not at or about them.

BEAT: Pete?
PETE: It’s made me realize that each person has their own memories and experiences; each person affects someone’s life in some way even if you don’t know you are doing it. Everyone is unique and makes a difference to society in his own way. Finally, these students have the chance to prove that to the world.
In June 2002, Sam Tennant, a student from the Hollybank Trust School in West Yorkshire, England came to Boston. Nicola Rowe was kind enough to share a few details from Sam’s visit:

“It was a very busy week for us. After a long flight, we didn’t have much time to get over the jet lag before the week’s program of events had started. Our first visit was to Boston College where we met Marialice, Matt Galligan and his mom, Cindi. We were excited and felt very privileged to be able to sit in on Matt’s session.

After meeting Matt, we went to the Campus School where we met our host for the week, Michael Nash. We all said our hellos, including Mike’s mum Kathy and his teacher Maureen. Sam then showed off his skills with the USB version of CameraMouse attached to his laptop. Everyone seemed very impressed!

Wednesday, we went into Boston to visit some of the sights, including the Freedom Trail, the State House and Quincy Market.

The rest of the week was still very hectic and involved visiting lots more attractions, including the North End, Paul Revere’s House and Old North Church. We were also fortunate to be able to go on a spectacular whale watch with Mike. This was a mixture of business and pleasure, as we spent a long time discussing how we use the systems on both sides of the Atlantic.

Friday was different, as we were all invited down to Mike’s house which was great. When we arrived, we had time for a quick drink before we were off down to Plymouth. It was great to see such an important historical place.

Saturday was our last full day in the US, so we hit the shops and spent time in the Prudential Centre… what a view you get from the observation floor!

It was a very busy week for us all, but we really enjoyed it. Hopefully, the things we learned will help users of the system both in the US and the UK. We also hope that one day Mike and his family might be able to visit us in the UK so that we can return the wonderful hospitality!”