

Local career role models inspiring every day



This week we start an inspirational series of interviews with local career role models who are inspiring us every day. This week **Hayden Moore** talks to Leon Diop, whose life has been defined by backing himself and taking chances, even if the odds seemed stacked against him or things weren't easy.

INSPIRING THE FUTURE IRELAND IS CHANGING LIVES

You can't be what you can't see in the world. Children need successful career role models and sometimes they're not easy to find – that's where we come in. We have an ever growing network of everyday super heroes and we bring them to your schools. Our network includes a huge variety of professionals; software engineers, illustrators, CEO's, plumbers, doctors, administration officers, artists, vets, and many, many more – we connect them to you and plant the seed of early ambition. We now offer our programme online! To find out more, Scan the QR code.



“There was one day where I was going to talk to Facebook and my friend was going to Slack. But then he ended up saying to me that he's not going to make the Slack talk and if we could swap – I was absolutely snapping 'cause I really wanted to give the Facebook talk. Anyway, I went to the talk with Slack and I ended up loving it, had a great time and about a month later the head of recruitment in Slack reached out to me to say that they have a job if I wanted to interview for it. I said yeah, just went for it and now I work for Slack. . .

FLYING in the face of adversity is something that Leon Diop thrives in.

You could say that up to this point, the 27-year-old's life has been defined by backing himself and taking chances, even if the odds seemed stacked against him or things weren't easy.

Today, the Crumlin resident finds himself as the Chief Executive Officer of Black and Irish and works with business communication platform, Slack.

Leon grew up in a mixed-race household in Springfield, the first child to Senegalese-born Sidy and Tallaght native Rachel.

“I would have grown up catholic, my mam was certain about that and my dad, he was a practicing Muslim but he didn't really care too much - I would have been exposed to the culture of both,” Leon says.

“I only would have grown up with my dad until I was around six, he moved to France and I would have had contact with him until I was maybe 12. “He passed away in 2011 when I was 16.

“There was a lot to reconcile after he passed, him and my mother went through a divorce and it was very public what was happening, so we were very much in the know.

“It was tough to understand what

was happening at that time but my stepdad Mark kind of came into the fold not too long after, so I didn't really feel like I was missing out on that father figure in my life.

“His death did affect me a little, it was hard to grasp the concept of seeing other people with their parents and knowing my biological father wasn't there.

“Just going on to achieve good things and not being able to share it with them, I didn't have that.

“It's a strange thing... as far as it could be with a biological parent passing away.”

Some of the uncertainty around losing his biological father was channelled through anger and frustration in school.

“I had a little bit of trouble after the death of my father and I found myself getting into different altercations,” Leon tells *The Echo*.

“I had a lot of anger and ultimately that came out in school, which wasn't ideal.

“Academically I was sound, I was able to get through tests and that but I struggled to keep my temper down in other situations.

“Look I was able to get through it, I got what I needed in the Leaving Cert and was able to resolve those issues.”



After graduating from St Mark's Community School, Leon decided to pursue medicine in Trinity College and UCD.

But after a while, Leon started to wonder if this was something he actually wanted to do.

And so, he decided to change direction and applied for the Bachelor of Applied Science in Psychology in Maynooth University – which set the wheels in motion for the next 7 years.

accountability, I ended up having to repeat that first year.”

Leon gathered himself, repeated that first year and powered all the way through to graduate in 2017 with the BSc in Psychology in his back pocket.

That was not the end of his time in Maynooth University.

He was elected as President of Maynooth Students' Union, making him responsible for the experience of some 13,000 students at the university.

During this time, Leon became incredibly passionate about student experience and, after a brief stint in Dorset College as Student Experience Manager, he decided he wanted a career change.

On the side, Leon and two of his friends, Boni Odoemene and Femi Bankole, started an Instagram page called Black and Irish – which exploded after the murder of George Floyd in the United States.

“I had been thinking of Black and Irish for two years before I did anything, I had that name but I was just sitting on it,” Leon details.

“Even before George Floyd's death I was always trying to challenge injustice.

“I had a pretty large court case with the LUAS and it had me thinking about anti-black and mixed-race racism. So we started Black and Irish to bring that discussion to people that may be blind to the biases.

“Its main function was to highlight black and mixed-race communities with them sharing their stories to spread awareness.”

What started off as an Instagram account has grown into an organisation which has a laser focus

on promoting equality in education, business, politics, media, entertainment and

community among other things.

Black and Irish does this through sharing stories of gaps of equality and inclusivity in society.

One of the main ways it does this is through the hugely popular The Black and Irish Podcast with RTÉ and talking to businesses and organisations – which is how Leon ended up where he is working today.

“We were going around different companies giving talks about racism in the workplace and in general life,” Leon explains.

“There was one day where I was going to talk to Facebook and my friend was going to Slack.

“But then he ended up saying to me that he's not going to make the Slack talk and if we could swap – I was absolutely snapping 'cause I really wanted to give the Facebook talk.

“Anyway, I went to the talk with Slack and I ended up loving it, had a great time and about a month later the head of recruitment in Slack reached out to me to say that they have a job if I wanted to interview for it.

“I said yeah, just went for it and now I work for Slack as a head of recruitment and customer experience.

“That's the whole thing, I never thought that I would end up working for a tech company or doing a psychology degree or being the CEO of Black and Irish, an organisation that could potentially employ people in the future – it's nuts.

“If you never take a chance, you'll never know what you're capable of achieving.

“You never know where you're going to end up, so don't be afraid to take those chances.”



INSPIRATION: Leon Diop, Chief Executive Officer of Black and Irish and head of recruitment and customer experience with business communication platform, Slack



VOLUNTEER SPEAKERS REQUIRED FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE

Do you want to help local young people learn about the realities of working life, and plan for their future careers? Do you live in the South County Dublin area? 'Inspiring the Future Ireland' is seeking volunteer speakers from all walks of life to take part in our career talks with local schools. We are especially seeking volunteers who have taken non-traditional career paths, overcome challenges, and those working in skilled or creative roles such as electricians, carpenters, hairdressers, beauticians, writers, etc. Volunteers from all backgrounds and sectors are needed. No previous public speaking experience necessary. Volunteer for as little as 1 hour per year. Sign up now! Visit www.inspiringthefuture.ie or contact the team on inspiring@sdcpartnership.ie



Inspiring the Future Ireland sponsored by

