

Christopher Robinson

Skill: Plumbing

From: County Tyrone
Competed in: WorldSkills 2005, Helsinki
Result: Medallion for Excellence

Qualifications

- 10 GCSE's
- 2 A levels
- NVQ level 3 in Mechanical Engineering (Plumbing)
- HNC Construction



For Christopher Robinson it was the combination of hands-on practicality and continuous study which attracted him to do a Modern Apprenticeship in Plumbing when he finished his 'A' levels aged 17. With a place at Queens University to study Computer Science secured, Christopher decided to follow his instincts and give plumbing a try and he has never looked back. Says Christopher, "I always thought plumbing looked interesting and although I didn't know any plumbers I was really attracted to doing something practical which required a degree of knowledge at the same time. I enjoyed it right from the start which I think has been a great motivator to improve my skills."

How did he get involved in competitions?

Christopher first became aware of skills competitions when he was at Fermanagh College on day release during his Modern Apprenticeship. He explains, "I began competing in local SkillBuild competitions and then it snowballed from there as I went on to compete in regional and UK events. Although I sometimes found it daunting, looking back it was really good experience as I'm sure it improved my skills and widened my outlook."

And how did he get selected to go to WorldSkills?

"Having won the UK plumbing competition in 2004 for SkillBuild I took part in a play off event with the runners-up for my year and the previous year's winner and runners up to secure my place for Helsinki. This was particularly nerve wracking as I knew the other competitors quite well. I was thrilled to win my place for the WorldSkills competition."

So what was the training and preparation like for WorldSkills?

"It was really hard work and took up quite a lot of time. In spite of this, with hindsight, I realised that I should have done more – WorldSkills is such an enormous event – but one which is hard to visualise without any obvious point of reference."

What kind of things did the training involve?

"There were two parts to the training and preparation; the technical training and the teambuilding work. My technical training involved learning new skills, such as techniques in heat/sand bending which are practised internationally and I did this at both

my college in Northern Ireland and other colleges in the UK. The team building training was where the whole 2005 WorldSkills team came together over several weekends and we learnt about how to cope under pressure and what to do when things go wrong. I also went to quite a few SkillBuild competitions and trained alongside the other competitors to get as much competition experience as possible."

And how supportive was his employer?

At the time of the competition Christopher was working for Roy Finlay in County Tyrone. "My employer was great. Although he was running a small business, he always encouraged me and gave me time off for all the extra training I had to do which I think is particularly hard for small companies. I did get quite a lot of publicity during the lead up and around the competition so I like to think this helped the business."

Was WorldSkills what he expected?

“WorldSkills was brilliant. I didn’t have any preconceived ideas about what it would be like which I think made it even more amazing. The whole experience was fantastic from beginning to end. I could never have imagined the scale of the event, it was huge! In a way, this helped me to cope with the pressure of the competition as the fact that I was a small part of the whole event helped to combat the pressure I felt to succeed.”

Was there anything that Christopher didn’t expect?

Prior to the competition itself, the UK team had a few days to familiarise themselves with their surroundings and prepare for the competition ahead. But for Christopher the settling in process was not as smooth as he had expected. “Prior to arriving in Finland I had hurt my back quite badly playing rugby and unfortunately I aggravated it when I arrived and ended up being driven across Helsinki in search of a chiropractor. Even more bizarrely the chiropractor turned out to be from my home county originally! For a while I was worried I wouldn’t be able to compete because of the back pain but luckily the manipulation and pain killers did their stuff and I was able to take part after all.”

And how did you cope with the competition itself?

“With regards to coping during the competition, I found the self hypnosis techniques we had learnt as part of the team building really beneficial. The second day of the competition was hardest for me but I used these relaxation techniques and I admit I was surprised at how effective they were in helping me to keep calm and stay on top of things.”

What benefits does Christopher think taking part in WorldSkills has given him?

“Looking back I think the whole experience has given me loads of benefits. The training, travelling, taking part – it has all helped to give me a lot more confidence than I had before and I feel as though there’s nothing that’s unobtainable now.”

And what will he remember most?

“There is very little to forget as the whole two weeks in Finland was so incredible. Every day there was something amazing, the opening ceremony, each day at the competition was different and I loved being part of the UK team. If I had to pinpoint one thing in particular it would be leading the UK team into the Opening Ceremony carrying the Union Jack, I can’t remember ever feeling so proud.”

Has WorldSkills changed anything for you?

“I have a lot more confidence than I had before I competed in WorldSkills. It took me out of my comfort zone which proved to me that I’ve got a lot of potential and has probably made me set my sights further than I would have done before.”

So what is Christopher doing now?

With the full support of his former employer who was looking to retire, Christopher became self employed in plumbing not long after returning from Finland in 2005. “It seemed like the natural next step for me and I love being my own boss. Work is going really well but I’m not taking anything for granted with the current state of the economy and I’m studying for a degree in Construction Management and Engineering at the University of Ulster one day a week. The way I see it, the downturn in the economy means that there’s more competition than ever and I want to be as qualified as I can so that when things pick up I’ll be in the best position possible.” Christopher also lectures part time at South West College and at the time of writing this was training two competitors for the Northern Ireland SkillBuild competition to be held in March 2009.

As to words of advice for future competitors, Christopher’s message is simple:

“Remember nothing is unobtainable! Do work hard because it really is worthwhile!”

And finally, with WorldSkills London 2011 just a few years away, what do you think will be the benefits to young people?

“I think the most important benefit will be that the event will give hope to young people. It will give them the ‘I can do that’ feeling and inspire them to see that anything’s possible if you are willing to put in the effort.”

For more information, please contact the PR Team, UK Skills: 020 7612 9260