

Your only limit is your own imagination

Anthony Reyers about his studies 'Communication Sciences' at KU Leuven

Anthony Reyers (28) from Mechelen suffers from a rare disorder, Norrie disease, which has left him blind since birth and has made him gradually lose his hearing. Yet his disability did not stop him from following the master's degree in 'Communication Sciences' at KU Leuven. Anthony spoke to SIHO about his approach and experiences during his studies.

Rare condition

Anthony was born blind and has a rare condition called Norrie disease, an inherited condition that affects the retina. When he was 18 years old, Anthony discovered that he would also lose his hearing, which is now associated with acute hearing loss attacks. 'I have a big passion for music. I am both a DJ and a producer. The first time I had sudden hearing loss, they said it was because I was listening to music through my headphones too loudly. I already suspected that this was not the cause. The largest attack was when I was 18 years old. I knew this was

not normal. When I did some research, it turned out to be a typical symptom of my condition. Fortunately, I heard enough to follow lessons and study in a normal way. So it didn't affect my studies too much, but it is something I have to deal with.'

Lack of acceptance

Before Anthony switched to general education in 5th grade in primary school, Anthony went to a school for the blind. 'There they noticed that I need more time than average for reading braille or other things. That is still the case today.'

Anthony's parents preferred that he went to regular ASO in secondary education and therefore, he no longer attended special education classes. The secondary school period was very difficult for Anthony. Where he was never really bullied, he did have the feeling of being left out. 'Looking back, it was probably a combination of my lack of social

skills, but also the misfortune to be in class groups that were not open to accepting others. When my classmates from ASO rushed out of the classroom and left me alone during breaks, the people from BSO always took care of me. I found this very remarkable. That was a pattern that has repeated itself for years.'

"I always had the feeling of being left out."

In secondary education, Anthony received extra guidance, where he was supported by a GON supervisor for certain subjects. 'It often happened that teachers did not feel like adapting their materials and making them accessible to me.'

This often made Anthony feel that he had to prove himself more than others. Both to

teachers and to classmates during group work. 'This was also during higher education, where everything depends on the goodwill of lecturers and professors.'

Be assertive

In the last years of secondary and early years of higher education, Anthony went to ICC camps. Inclusion Creates Chances organizes all kinds of workshops to teach young people with visual disabilities communication and IT skills. 'These camps taught me a lot and brought me much assertiveness. Because of this I dared to go to professors myself to discuss possible solutions to my stumbling blocks. But not everyone has that confidence to make clear what he or she needs.'

Anthony has been on the board of ICC Belgium for a while now. 'I started as a participant myself. Later we started a Flemish delegation with a group. Now Belgian youngsters can also participate every year. I get a lot of satisfaction from this because you see the young people blossom.'

Initially, Anthony started his studies in higher education in the field of French/English Language and Literature, given his great interest in language. Because the level of

French was too high for Anthony, he switched to the Communication Sciences programme. 'I was already very passionate about radio at the time, but I did not want to follow a specific training for this. I wanted to educate myself academically first and then pursue a specialization in radio afterwards, which I did.'

Support

At the beginning of his studies, Anthony decided to live in a dorm with assisted living support. In higher education, Anthony consulted the center in which conversions are done. Anthony also uses reading software and braille display. However, the smartphone is his greatest help. 'My smartphone contains everything I need. Also in terms of mobility, I rely heavily on my smartphone. I often study on my smartphone because it has applications that can read everything to you.'

Erasmus+

Anthony had two Erasmus+ experiences. One to Louvain-la-Neuve and one to Loughborough University in England. Thanks to the ICC camps, Anthony quickly felt that he is very international minded, which made going on Erasmus+ an obvious choice. 'I had to become independent, I had to gain the confidence to get somewhere. The best way to get that confidence was to

throw yourself in.'

“Going on Erasmus+ was an obvious choice.

Before Anthony started his Erasmus+ adventure in England, he had already started to discover the environment and support on site months in advance through a preparatory grant from the national agency. 'When I started, the support of the host university was suddenly almost completely gone. The Disability Office had been reorganized, the matters I discussed during my preliminary visit had not been followed up and the Community Supported Volunteers had been abolished. Help was supposed to come through an outside firm, but it took so long that I eventually organized it myself. I really had to give it my all to find my way. I actually couldn't study that much because I just had to keep on being very active in organizing my own social life. I had to make myself and my disability known, including through Facebook groups if I wanted to get to know people and participate in activities. In the end I succeeded and I experienced many crazy and beautiful adventures there. I would do it again in a minute.'

Love for music

Anthony always had a strong love for music, which is why he is now also working on it professionally with a Dutch producer. Last year during corona, his community grew to several thousand followers following his live streams on Twitch. 'This made me realize that I wanted to fully focus on this and leave other projects aside for a while. Because I don't know how much longer I'll be able to do this. I went all in. We already have bookings for San Francisco during the summer.'

Anthony has already graduated. Concerning the transition to the labor market, Anthony is keen to further develop his music career. 'If things are actually going well, you might not see me in Belgium for the next two years. That is a dream that may never come true, but that I want to pursue anyway. After that I might enter the podcasting and reporting industry. Who knows what the future will bring for me.'

Difficult integration

During the first lockdown Anthony moved to live alone in Mechelen. He indicates that this is certainly not without difficulties. 'I am someone who really thrives when I can meet new people or embark on new adventures. Corona ensures

that this is hardly possible and it is therefore not easy to integrate here. I also notice that I am losing my independence, since I don't have to go anywhere anymore and that is unfortunate.'

Believe in yourself

For people who find themselves in a similar situation, Anthony encourages to believe in yourself and just go for it. 'Your only limit is your imagination. The limits are only there to dare to break them. Never let yourself be fooled that things are impossible. If you really want something and if you really want to go for it, then a lot is possible. Everything is always adaptable. It mainly depends on the world around you and how far they want to go to make those reasonable adjustments. Dare to ask if you need anything. At the same time, push yourself to venture into the seeing world as much as possible. It goes both ways. It is not only them who have to adapt to us, but we also have to adapt as hard as possible to the seeing world. Good interaction is the best way.'



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