

# Peace-building & Cross-Cultural Connections

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## Location: Belfast, Northern Ireland

Belfast is the capital and largest city of Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom. It is a vibrant city with a complex, interesting history and welcoming and resilient people. It has come a long way since “the Troubles” that began in the 1960s, when there was widespread violence between those who wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom (often Protestant) and the oppressed minority who wanted a united Ireland (often Catholic). The peace process in the 1990s halted most of the violence, but there is still a tension in the city that you can see and feel.

I examined socially just community organizing that builds relationships, understanding, and peace through youth empowerment in a city where historical trauma, oppression, and violence have led to cultural segregation.

As an Irish American, I felt personally connected to this project and had to push myself to see beyond my own biases. This meant trying to see beyond the oppression of the Irish (Catholics) and understand that the violence impacted Loyalists (Protestants) as well.



## Project

My project focused on:

- 1) Peace building through youth empowerment, specifically ways in which community organizations build peace and understanding without alienating one group, insulting cultural values, or forgetting the damage that has been done.
- 2) Using knowledge of historical trauma to guide community work and youth development.
- 3) Cross-cultural connections between the Irish and American Indians through experiences of cultural trauma, oppression, and resistance.

My project was conducted through informal interviews with community members and community organizations, observations, and research.



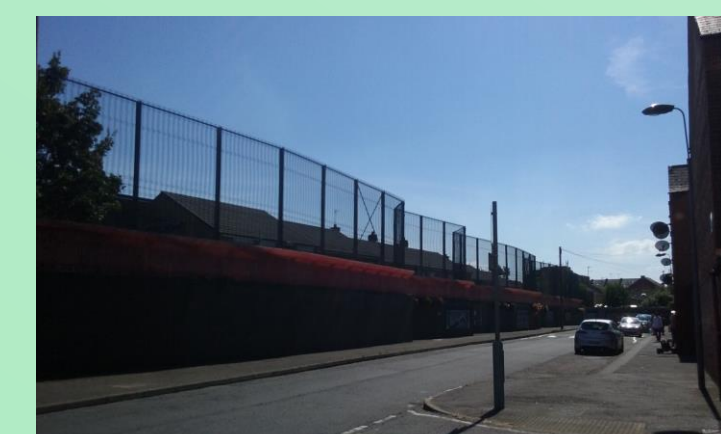
## Community Partners

Belfast City Council, Corrymeela, Donegal Adventure Centre, Institute of Study Abroad Ireland, Sinn Fein

## Outcomes

Historical trauma and cultural oppression do not simply disappear with the passage of time. There are still paramilitary groups in existence that target young men and boys for recruitment, and evidence of this is seen through some of the murals done by extremists. The legacy of violence in Northern Ireland includes cultural segregation, with an actual wall dividing Protestants and Catholics in working class neighborhoods. Some community members are ready to move on, while others still feel oppressed and/or angry.

Intergenerational trauma may contribute to the current high suicide rates among young men in Northern Ireland. The culture of silence in Northern Ireland, however, is changing. Some strategies communities are using include: community gardens where men can talk while they work, incorporating youth voice and empowering youth/young adult voice through political power, storytelling and sharing cross-community, challenging individual and community versions of history, critical consciousness raising, intra-community and inter-community dialogue, education, murals and other public art.



Some of the many connections I found between Irish and American Indians included: fighting the “get over it” mentality & educating people on the effects of colonization, encountering false versions of history in school or in the general public, a culture of silence, coping with humor, re-connecting youth to culture through language, history, music, dance, and other traditions, resistance and resilience.

Other countries can learn from the legacy of violence in Northern Ireland and the ways in which cities like Belfast work to create peace. When people do not have a voice, the last resort is often violence. Social workers have a vital role in recognizing and calling out oppression, fighting for equality, uplifting oppressed voices, and empowering communities.

I will tell my own story of what I learned through a Digital Story, creative writing pieces, and a reflective paper. This story will be shared with classmates, former co-workers at the Office of Student Conflict Resolution, and co-workers and community members at my field placement in Detroit, American Indian Health and Family Services.

## Classroom & Career Connections

As a Detroit-Community Based Initiative Scholar, I strive to be careful of the narratives I encounter and may perpetuate regarding a community. The stories and opinions on the conflict (both past violence and current tension) were entirely different depending on who I asked. Ideally, I would have chosen to speak with Loyalists and/or people who identified strongly as British, too. However, the connections I had and/or were able to make tended to lean more towards the Irish/Republican side.

My community organizing classes were helpful in guiding me in entering and exiting communities as well as recognizing that the community members are the experts. My youth empowerment course was also helpful in understanding the levels in which organizations incorporate youth voice.

I plan to use my experience in Northern Ireland to inform my work with American Indian youth and in working with a community from a trauma-informed perspective. This project also sparked an interest in International social work, so I do not think this project is the end of my exploration into cross-cultural connections or even my relationship with Belfast.

## Advice

- ✓ Start planning early, but be flexible with your plans; they will change over time.
- ✓ Don't be afraid to reach out to even the most tenuous of connections—you'd be surprised by how nice/helpful people can be!
- ✓ Explore the city by yourself on foot if you can & talk to people you encounter; this was often how I stumbled upon some of the best experiences.
- ✓ Be respectful in how you enter & exit the community, your interactions with individuals, & what you do with the stories you collect.
- ✓ Acknowledge limitations you will have due to the short amount of time. It was frustrating to have people reach out when I was back in the U.S., willing to meet with me, but unless they were willing to talk on Skype, I had to leave their valuable perspective out of the project.
- ✓ Be transparent about your biases, your purpose in the project, & what you can or cannot contribute in the short amount of time you are there.
- ✓ It takes time to build connections. Do the best you can with the time and resources you have. Be sure to follow up with those who helped along the way with thank you notes and sharing your final project.



## Acknowledgments

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~Go raibh maith agaibh!~