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Peaceful Schools International

Northern Ireland Conflict Resolution Program Student Reflections 2012-2013

Introduction

The following are a series of “reflective reports” written by twelve Saint Mary’s University students detailing their experiences as participants in the eighth annual “Northern Ireland Conflict Resolution Program”. These participants are both graduate and undergraduate students representing the Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Science, and Faculty of Commerce at Saint Mary’s University.

As such, these students were active participants in a progressive international initiative which is designed to share experiences and promote conflict resolution practices within numerous Canadian and Northern Irish schools. This initiative was made possible by Saint Mary’s University’s Office of the Vice President Academic & Research, Saint Mary’s University Faculty Union, Saint Mary’s Alumni Association, Peaceful Schools International, The Charitable Irish Society of Halifax, “An Cumann” (the Irish Association of Nova Scotia), The Estate of Patrick Power, The Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission, Alternative Dispute Resolution Atlantic Institute, Oxford School, Halifax Central Junior High, Inglis Street Elementary School, St. Mary’s Elementary School and numerous other organizations and personal donations both inside and outside the university community.

The project is in its eighth year and has continued to provide students with meaningful experiences both experientially and academically since its inception in 2004. The program is designed to first provide basic conflict resolution training to Saint Mary’s students as well as opportunities to facilitate conflict resolution workshops with children and youth within the Halifax Regional Municipality. This year Saint Mary’s students worked extensively with youth at the

following schools in Halifax: 1) Oxford School; 2) St. Mary's Elementary; 3) Halifax Central Junior High; and 4) Inglis Street Elementary.

In February, 2013, the Saint Mary's students departed for Belfast, Northern Ireland to facilitate workshops with the following schools during the week of February 18 - 22, 2013:

- 1) Holy Trinity Primary School; 2) tSléibhe Dhuibh (Irish Language Primary School); and
- 3) Gaelscoil na Móna (Irish Language Primary School).

It should be noted that one student returned this year under the auspices of furthering her studies in peace education by virtue of accepting a leadership position within this program. Five participants in this initiative also had the opportunity to study under Dr. Hetty van Gurp (founder of Peaceful Schools International) in direct relation to their participation in this program. It should be noted that these supplementary educational opportunities are directly linked to Saint Mary's focus on the importance and relevance of "engaged learning" for its students.

In 2013, our focus both locally and in Northern Ireland was educating children and youth on the subjects of "empathy and human rights" which we have determined as meaningful and relevant topics within the broader spectrum of "peace education". In conclusion, I wish to extend my most sincere gratitude to all of our supporters for your generous contribution(s) to this initiative over the past eight years. I believe the impact of your support is detailed in a most meaningful fashion in the following reports.

Sincerely,

Bridget E. Brownlow, B.A., M.A., Con.Res.Cert.
Conflict Resolution Advisor
Saint Mary's University

Student Group Leader: Krisite Mailman

From the moment I stepped off the plane in Belfast, I knew it had something special to offer. The first weekend I was there I had the time to get to know some of the people of Belfast, and to experience Belfast and Northern Ireland as it is, very rich in culture and history. I went to Belfast believing I had a good handle on what had happened there and the problems that Belfast was facing today. I was wrong. I quickly realized that what I knew was just scrapping the surface level and that the problems were far more dynamic and complicated than I was expecting. This left an extraordinary amount of room for me to learn new things and enrich my understanding of the problems people face day-to-day in Belfast and the rest of the North of Ireland.

Our wonderful coordinators wanted us to get as much out of this trip as possible. They took the time to set up meetings with various people from Belfast that identified as either Loyalist or Nationalist. We heard their heart-wrenching stories that offered us a small glimpse into what it was like to be alive and in Belfast during the Troubles. These people helped to explain the current situation in Belfast, and we were quick to realize that the peace that has been established there is shaky, at best.

It wasn't until I was in our first school that I realized that all of our hard work and fundraising from before we left had paid off. We met with the Principal before we started our workshops, and hearing him talk about the school and the passion their community had about an effective education and the importance of a safe school environment made me realize how important what we were doing was. Teaching positive ways to deal with conflict is crucial especially in a sectarian society like Belfast. We presented the workshops in Halifax, and this was a great way for us to practice the material and address the issue of conflict here in Halifax, but it was not until Belfast that I really understood the importance of what we were doing.

The children in Belfast received our group of volunteers so well. Their enthusiasm and willingness to learn was what motivated me to present the workshop the best I could. My group was fortunate enough to receive feedback from Rick Lewis, from Peaceful Schools International. Rick has a wealth of knowledge about facilitating workshops and working with children. With every suggestion Rick gave us, we made appropriate changes or accommodations in the workshop, and each time we presented it, it got even better and we became even more confident in the material itself.

It is hard to gauge how effective the workshops are going to be until you are in the schools. The workshop this year was very fitting and the children loved it. I think the children learned valuable lessons from our workshop, things like how their actions affect others, what empathy is, how to talk about their feelings and etc... As much as the children valued our workshops, I think it helped that we had accents and were from a different

place. It was so rewarding to have a child light up from understanding a concept you are trying to teach them.

The children I encountered affected my life in a major way. I learned about the backgrounds that a lot of these children were coming from and the difficulties that they and their parents faced every day. I listened when I was being spoken to, I tried to hear people's stories and listen with a level of empathy. I shared my stories when it was appropriate and I quickly realized that everyone has their own story, a *different* story.

I think that this program offers so much and is very valuable to children in Belfast. We do not go there with the idea of fixing the problems in Belfast, but rather to be an unbiased part in the peace efforts. A program like this that deals with international peace education is crucial. Conflict is universal, it may be experienced differently depending on where you come from, but everyone faces conflict in their life at some point. The children of Belfast are dealing with years and years of a segregated society and a society with two separate national identities only fosters an environment for hostility and conflict. This is why it is so important to start with the children, the new generation, in hope that the cycle of conflict and division will lessen or cease all together.

I have nothing but positive things to say about the program and the coordinators. I look forward to encouraging people I know to get involved in this program, because it is beneficial to Saint Mary's Students and the students in Belfast. I was overwhelmed by the kindness of the people in Belfast. I have done many workshops in Atlantic Canada as a Red Cross volunteer, but I have never felt so welcome in a school as I did in Belfast, by both the teachers and students.

I am beyond appreciative for the wonderful opportunity I have been afforded. As much as we had to offer, I equally gained from Belfast and its people. I learned a lot about myself and about the problems in Northern Ireland. I even learned new ways to deal with conflict in a positive way. I walk away from this chapter of my life forever grateful for my experiences in Belfast, the people I met and the things that I have learned.

Sincerely,

Kristie Mailman

Student Facilitator: Ashely Crouch

Resilience is the first word I would use to describe the main message of this experience. Resilience of the people who have survived the struggles and resilience of the city itself, which still stands strong after thirty years of violent conflict. This trip was the first time I had ever visited a post-war society and I'm hoping it won't be my last. The people I met inspired me through their strength, determination, wisdom, and hope. My eyes have been opened to a way of life that I was fortunate to never experience as a child. It has affected my future academic interests and my level of understanding and compassion for other people.

The first real shock I had was driving through the city on my first day seeing the fences, gates, and walls that lined virtually every street. There were murals and graffiti on the sides of houses and memorial gardens for the people who died on either side of the conflict. When we talked to people however, they were as kind and friendly as in Halifax. They were generous, curious about us, and more than willing to tell us their stories and the history of Belfast. Talking to every single person you would never know the challenges they faced as children. So many talked about "the Troubles" without even getting emotional. So many people were able to move forward with their lives finding joy. It gave me so much hope for the future of Northern Ireland and the youth growing up there. I felt empowered seeing all of the adults who survived such trauma and have become part of building peace and turning Northern Ireland into a better place for everyone. I was inspired to think about what I can do in Halifax but also in my future work involving religion and social justice.

Being in the schools was an incredible experience. The children were polite, smart, and caught on quickly to what we were talking about. After completing all of our training, as well as taking the "Teaching Peace in Northern Ireland" course I was able to see all of our theories and workshops come to fruition. The children in the elementary schools were receptive to us and gave such amazing and insightful responses to our discussion about conflict that I was actually amazed. It felt so rewarding to work with youth who have not yet developed such strong biases and who are still able to change their thinking to a worldview of peace and unity that I came home with a sense of accomplishment. I felt that our group had made a real impact. They really seemed to get the message of equality and empathy; the workshops helped them see how our actions affect the people around us. I even found myself becoming more understanding of others as I taught other people the importance of doing so.

Before taking this trip I had deliberated on various honors thesis topics for next year. After my experience in Northern Ireland I now know that I will write my thesis in an area related to religion and social justice. Though still passionate about my field of religious studies, I was deeply influenced by the hope and messages of peace from the people I

talked to. One such story was of Evelyn, who had been to jail during the Troubles and witnessed many atrocities during her life. She was incredibly strong and wise about the past and her conviction that Northern Ireland can become a peaceful home for its citizens. She endured physical and emotional abuse yet she has managed never to lose sight of her vision.

Another person of inspiration to me was the manager of our hotel. She oversees an integration project that brings people from both sides of the conflict to work together. She lost people during the Troubles and is now raising her niece and nephew. Every morning she was telling jokes and went out of her way to ensure I had lots of gluten free food to eat (due to my intolerance). I was amazed and impressed with her spirit. The idea of the resilience of the human spirit and the wisdom that we develop through conflict blossomed here as I got to know her over our first weekend. I have become interested in future research relating to spirituality and justice in post-war societies, perhaps even some research I do could be conducted in Belfast. How are people maintaining hope and building a better society based on their spirituality or religion? I believe I could find some interesting answers from the people in Northern Ireland.

On our first full day there we spoke to a group of kids doing a murder mystery weekend at the hotel. They were having a blast and it seemed like a normal high school adventure until we learned that this was a project aimed at bringing loyalist and republican kids together. One young boy said something I'll never forget, which was "I'm making a friend with this guy who, two days ago, was my enemy." At around 16 years of age these youth already think of people they don't know as "enemies". I had never experienced dialogue like this before, even during my nine months of volunteering with Katimavik, where I worked with a lot of minority groups and disadvantaged people. It was eye opening to realize that there are people in the world who feel this way and this is the reason for such deep-rooted societal conflict.

Finally, I feel as though I have gained a deeper understanding of the workings of societies and individual relationships. Through the trip and the course that coincides, I have read a lot about worldviews. I have learned about equality, justice, compassion, empathy, and cultures of division versus unity. I read about them and then was able to experience them firsthand. I feel privileged for the opportunity to see written reports being lived out by the society of study. I got to see firsthand how cultures of division, or in-group versus out-group mentality affect the lives of citizens. I then got to work on developing cultures of unity in the school system and learn how to reshape the worldview of youth to establish a real, lasting change in their culture. I love what Peaceful Schools International is doing. I believe in the message so strongly as a child that was bullied and as an adult who cares deeply about social justice and the well being of others.

I honestly wish that more people had a chance to do a program like this during their university degree. This is an experience I will come back to whenever I am doing research on social justice. I have learned so much from the locals and also my own group. I am beginning to piece together ways to build a better future for everyone. There are so many inspiring people that have allowed me understand new ways of examining conflict and finding ways to resolve it. As much as it was hard to listen to firsthand accounts of personal and societal struggles, it was empowering more than anything because there is always hope. It gives me strength to imagine that if these people can survive war and move forward, I can find the strength to push through any difficulty I may face. I could easily write fifty pages on what I feel I learned through this program but I feel like I have covered the underlying important themes. I am so appreciative for this opportunity.

Sincerely,

Ashely Crouch

Student Facilitator: Lakeisha McSweeney

When we get into the habit of truly paying attention to life, we often find that miracles are all around us. They are simply everyday occurrences seen more clearly. – Chelle Thompson, Editor of Inspiration Line

Let me preface this with an admission that I have always wanted to visit Ireland, more specifically the Republic of Ireland and in 2007 signed up for Aer Lingus email alerts to keep abreast of airline ticket deals. I wanted to see if the “green” on television was an actual “green” in the distant land. Visiting Northern Ireland on the other hand, was not a destination of choice. My previous rationale is from childhood memories of watching “The Troubles” play out on my television screen. I know that I am perhaps dating myself but I am a self-titled news junkie and no day went by without me watching ABC News with Peter Jennings. In the news business for which I have had a career we say ‘what bleeds leads’ and from my childhood recollection, images of Northern Ireland, Belfast in particular, were that of bombings, and shootings and it was at this time that I first heard of the Irish Republican Army. I watched with great anticipation leading to and eventually the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement but placing Northern Ireland among top cities on my travel list did not occur.

Fast forward more than a decade later in Halifax, in attendance at Saint Mary’s University when a friend recommended that I get involved in the Northern Ireland Conflict Resolution Society. He said the highlight of the trip would be meeting the people of the country. As the weeks passed and there seemed to be heightened violence in Belfast, Bridget sent emails on all the violent activity in the country and in person she repeatedly said “The university will not send any of us there if it is dangerous.” I trusted her judgment and as the time for the trip drew closer, hearing from a professor from Northern Ireland with family still living there and undertaking readings on the country in my spare time, my anxiousness eventually subsided. Northern Ireland still had not made it to my travel list but like the other group members I was anticipating the trip instead of being anxious about ‘what if(s)’ and my childhood rationale was no longer an issue.

Now, I have, rather, we have all returned safely from Northern Ireland, some from the Republic as well and it was a trip of a lifetime.

For me what the news I watched as a child did not capture was the resilience of the Irish people. The news did not capture their optimism. The news did not capture their zeal for life and no camera lens could ever capture their ever-abiding faith in humanity. All of these I saw firsthand. I saw these in the eyes of the children at the schools. As a foreigner entering the grounds one immediately notices the Goliath-like fences and extra security measures such as entry codes to buildings but when one entered the classroom it was universal comments and questions. ‘Tell us about your country.’ ‘What are some of your

cities in Canada?’ And of course the pop question of the week ‘Do you know Justin Bieber’? When asked to define the term conflict their answers were wide and ranging and one got the sense that although insulated in the building they were well-aware of the outside world and not so tarnished by scars of their country’s past to not dream of bright futures.

I saw the attributes too in the eyes of the taxi cab drivers. While many of their colleagues and even family as they shared with us were killed during the tempestuous periods, upon learning we were tourists pointed out the patchwork of segregation such as the Peace Wall but did not hesitate to point out the natural beauty of Cave Hill or Black Mountain and declared what a wonderful country they live in. I think however the aforementioned qualities were encapsulated by the Loyalists and Nationalists supporters that addressed us, all ex-prisoners with *Eibhlín* being a former member of the IRA but all confident that the best for their country is ahead.

For me the trip was my first to Europe but it was also a first trip to a post conflict country where I was captivated by the sheer joy seen in the smiling faces of the people of Northern Ireland. And while Northern Ireland is not free from all their troubles and there is still a clear division, their line demarcation, from an outsider’s view, seems to be fading. The people of Northern Ireland in my opinion with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement signalled a peace with their past that is evident, and they are embracing their present and making strides to build a better future and this makes them and their love for their country and zest for life remarkable and simply unforgettable.

I believe that every individual should have the opportunity to experience for themselves not the mere landscape of Northern Ireland but the people that make that land so unforgettable. I applaud Bridget Brownlow and Emily Anderson for undertaking the task of ensuring not only Canadians but opening to all senior students at this institution to be a part of an adventure that perhaps would take another decade if ever, to rival.

Sincerely,

Lakeisha McSweeney

Student Group Leader: Victoria Bell

My name is Victoria Bell and I have recently participated in Saint Mary's Conflict Resolution Society's annual trip to Northern Ireland. My current field of study is in Sociology and Religious Studies, each of which has provided me with tools that have been beneficial for this program. I would like start by expressing my absolute passion and support for the messages being portrayed by Peaceful Schools International. I have always been very interested in peace education but this program has provided myself, as well as the other students with the opportunity to apply the skills and knowledge that we have learned these past few years at Saint Mary's and to really see the benefits of our hard work. Throughout this experience, we have been able to represent Saint Mary's by respectfully engaging children and faculty in our workshops and presentations to spread peace education, not only in Northern Ireland but also throughout the HRM.

Prior to our trip we were encouraged to ask as many questions as we would like to returning students and leaders. We were well educated on the dangers that a post-conflicted society might pose and informed of the obstacles we could be facing during our travels. It was evident that the students on this trip were chosen with great care and intention. It became more evident the closer we became that the students chosen all demonstrated a passion for human rights, dedication to academia and a drive to impart peace education for future generations.

My experience from this trip is one that will have an impact on me for the rest of my life. Not only were we encouraged to apply our own knowledge to the workshops that we did in the schools, but the knowledge that we acquired on this trip was beyond what I could have hoped for. On this trip we were thankful to have met many important and influential individuals who have opened my eyes to a whole new world of social complexities experienced throughout Northern Ireland's history. Even when we were experiencing the more tourist related aspects of Northern Ireland, there was so much information provided on the history and conflict that these people have endured. From our talks at Sinn Féin to the taxi drivers, every person in Belfast had a different story to tell and most of these stories had very somber endings. It was for this reason that I found this trip to be so humbling. The ability to meet influential political figures and to hear first hand experiences of the impact that this war has had on its people was much more impactful than any research I had done prior to this trip. I have been interested in the conflict in Northern Ireland for quite some time, but after this experience I am quite sure that I still only know the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the hardships these people have endured during these past few centuries.

The aspect I was most looking forward to on this trip, also happened to be my favorite part, which was our time with the children. These children at the moment are

living and learning in segregated environments that allows for the conflict and division to still exist. That being said, the kids we worked with were eager to learn and very receptive to our workshops messages. This gave me such immense satisfaction that we were able to genuinely get through to them. I went into the classrooms imagining that at least one of the children would be a future leader of their country or potentially a politician promoting unity amongst Northern Ireland. Maybe they would never have realized their passion for human rights before our workshops. Our job was to lay the foundation in their minds and hope that they would take to the positive aspects of our message and I feel that our group was successful in accomplishing this.

If there is one thing that I took from this trip it is that peace will not come quickly or easily. This will be a lengthy process that must begin from the ground up, which I feel is directly linked to the education system. The current situation in Northern Ireland is too complex and fragile to simply integrate all schools or to immediately implement a full on peace based curriculum. It will not be until there is greater empathy for one another and the collective desire to address the real, controversial issues of their past that they will begin to view each other as equal citizens, free from exclusion and violence. This process of implementing peace education starts with organizations such as Peaceful Schools International who have done the research and realize what changes can and should be made in post-conflict societies. With the help of ambitious students and the desire for change from schools in Northern Ireland we will begin to see with each generation, the decrease in hatred and the increase of the willingness to change for the better. The fact that this organization has been welcomed to return for 9 years, in my opinion, demonstrates a dire need for a continuation of peace education in Northern Ireland.

The connections that this program has created over the past decade are an indication of the impact that this initiative has made in Belfast. Considering that we were able to sit down and openly ask questions to important individuals from both sides of the conflict in such a comfortable manner demonstrates to me that this program has consistently and successfully represented Saint Mary's University and Peaceful Schools International with dignity and respect.

This trip could not have come at a more perfect time in my own personal life. It has encouraged me to continue on the path I have been taking in regard to my education and has helped me realize my passion to continue promoting peace education and life lessons as a curriculum to children and schools all over the world. Teaching children how to comfortably integrate themselves into society and how they should treat those around them is very much neglected in our schools today. I am encouraged by the message put across by Peaceful Schools International which aims at addressing these glitches in the system.

I feel that this trip has been a crucial turning point in my Saint Mary's experience and has allowed me to acquire the proper tools needed in order to continue pursuing this style of work for whatever my future career might entail. I cannot stress enough my support for this program and my encouragement for its continual success. I chose Saint Mary's University in hopes that opportunities such as this trip would arise and I am proud that was able to represent the University and Peaceful Schools International to the best of my ability.

Best Regards,

Victoria Bell

Student Coordinator + Group Leader: Erin McIntosh

When I first became involved with the Northern Ireland Conflict Resolution Project as a volunteer, October 2012, I would never have imagined the extent in which I would alter my life around it. Being able to return this year as a group leader and work in coordinating the project has been a true privilege. I attribute much of my personal growth in the past year to the program, and a large portion of it coming from the lessons I have learned from who I have come to see as mentors, Emily and Bridget. I will take skills away from this program that will enable me to succeed for the rest of my life. The value of this program is limitless for future participants and I wait eagerly to begin preparations for next year's group.

One of the most profound messages I have found in our work in Northern Ireland is the apparent boundless resilience of communities and children. The people of Northern Ireland have experienced hardships in which I cannot even pretend to fully comprehend and yet they will greet you with a warmth I have seen in very few other places. Belfast is a city which has faced turmoil yet the vast majority of the people still strive every day to focus on what makes it beautiful. Always trying to carry the city to a better place and ensure a better future for their children. This ability to bounce back, to keep trying to move forward even though there are events which try to push it back, is a remarkable phenomenon. You can see this especially with the children, who may have been evacuated from their homes the night before in fear of violence or who may have not been able to afford to eat breakfast that morning, but still show up in class with their smiles beaming, ready to learn and listen to their new friends with funny Canadian accents. To me, this is an inspiration.

The beautiful complexity of Northern Ireland is the contrast between this strong-willed resilience and the chilling fragility. It is a city that vibrates with energy if you know what to open your eyes for. There is a sense that though many are working to move forward, everyone is on their toes, standing their guard for the moment that someone goes too far in the other direction. Fragility and resilience, two obviously contradictory terms, but that's Belfast for you. There are so many dimensions to this city that I expect I will spend most of my life trying to discover them and will still never find my work done. This contrast is what makes our work in the classrooms seem so important though! I like to think that in some small way we are helping to shape a generation which will see alternatives to taking the actions which set them back, instilling a sense of possibility and hope for alternatives to work. That eventually in the future the fear of moving backwards will be such a faraway concept that the option to move forward to the only conceivable way to go. Fragility an abstract concept used to describe the past, secure in their peace.

There is a huge emphasis on education in Belfast, as the best way forward. You can talk to Loyalists and Republicans alike and both would place a great value on the need for a strong education. That makes the chance to work within Bernardo's Children Charity schools program even more special. At the end of the day you feel like you might have made a little difference whether or not it is just within your own self. The school system in Belfast is a remarkable thing. The sheer passion and commitment that communities place in the construction of neighborhood schools is aweing. We were lucky enough this year to be able to work in more Irish language schools than in the past. These schools manifest straight from the community, started by parents and funded by donations until recognized fully by the state. The people who work at these schools sacrifice many wages and time in order to provide for the children. It is an honour to be recognized as a worthy part of their curriculum and be able to work with them.

For me, as a Political Science and International Development Studies student, I have been so fortunate to experience the things that I have studied first hand in Belfast. My main areas of focus are on contentious and violent politics, but more specifically ethnic conflict and identity politics. This makes the work that we do, the people we meet and the thing we learn even more exciting to me. Every time I learn something new in class I can relate it to the things I have seen in Northern Ireland, this program has not only heightened my ability to apply and understand the conceptual foundations learned at Saint Mary's but has only increased my drive to learn more. I can think of very few other places that I know of which can better highlight the complexities of identity politics than Northern Ireland. Every student participant, regardless as their academic interests will walk away with the understanding of the need to assess situations from every angle. With the knowledge that there is no easy answer for the things they see around them. The ability to exercise great empathy goes hand and hand with this. To be able to hear stories of struggles unimaginable to our ways of life emphasizes the need for great empathy. In such a polarized community the Northern Ireland Conflict Resolution Project actualizes the concept of there being two sides to every story in no better way. The biggest example of this for me is the way of how the two sides of the community often think of each other with such distain but both show such kindness to the students and others around them.

I think one of the biggest learning opportunities of the program comes from the team dimension of it. Having the experience to travel with a group and work as a team is a skill set I will use time and time again in a professional career. I learned more about conflict resolution this year as a group leader than I have doing workshops. The trip is when you are given the opportunity to really apply what you have been teaching in classrooms in Halifax for months. Patience, flexibility and communication are life skills you do not necessarily get a chance to learn in university class rooms but are none the less crucial to your success in the future. For me working to coordinate some part of this program has

taught me how to organize, which I largely owe to Emily. It might seem like a small step but a little organization makes a huge difference when trying to juggle a couple of jobs and full time school! Besides all the beautiful ideas you discover and people you meet in Belfast this program help grow very base skills as well.

I love this program, as cliché as it sounds, it has changed my life forever. It may sound a little dramatic but that's how impactful this has been for me. I have had the opportunity to meet people whose stories will resound through my head always. It has led me to find the path which I would like to continue my schooling with and what I would like to do as a career. It helped me get involved in my own community and really feel purposeful with my days. I cannot say thank you enough to all those who have supported this program and continue to support it year after year. Thank you, you make a difference in the lives of student young and old all over the world.

Sincerely,

Erin McIntosh

Student Facilitator: Callum Page

This year I was fortunate enough to return once again to Northern Ireland along with the Saint Mary's Conflict Resolution Society. I had had the prior opportunity to be apart of this society last year in 2011-12, and found myself, quite unexpectedly, a part of the program again this year. This year, due to unforeseen circumstances impacting another participant, I was contacted to assist when a spot opened up at the last minute. Knowing of the great experience that I had last year I was quick to jump on the opportunity to go again this year.

Upon meeting the group I was excited and ready to and teach with this exceptional group of university students. The group that participated this year were a dynamic, energetic, and interested group and it showed in their ability and excitement to be working and partaking in the activities set up for them in Belfast. Their energy and openness made my own transition into this close group all the easier and allowed me to quickly become comfortable and feel like a member of this team who was there from the beginning.

As I was one of two returning students to Belfast I was lucky to be able to provide guidance and assistance to others about what they may like to see and do and give advice and history on the different areas. I enjoyed becoming a person that others would come to ask how things run or what a certain experience is going to be like. As I stated earlier, being a part of this project was a great opportunity and to be able to experience it again was a huge privilege. I really enjoyed the chance to be able to reconnect with the people I had met last year and see the numerous changes to Belfast that have happened over the past year. The excitement of seeing Belfast again and knowing my way around already allowed me to be immediately comfortable in my surroundings and I did not need to take anytime to adjust to the city, I was good to go right away.

This year we were given the opportunity to work within the Irish Medium Schools, which are the immersion schools similar to our French programs. Going into these smaller types of schools was a great way to see how other school systems work without the Church background to their program. These schools were community created, funded, and ran and the pride in these schools was undeniable. I found them to be a great, warm, and welcoming environment that would be a great place for youth to attend. When speaking with the administration and teachers in the school you could see that they really loved their schools and were invested fully into the cultural learning experience that they were providing to the youth of West Belfast.

This year we also had many opportunities to meet with members of political parties and regular yet important community members. This part of the program was a continued success that I feel myself and many others got a lot out of this part of the program as well. We even had one of our speakers come out to dinner with us and speak on a further

personal level about her struggles and the struggles of her community she represents, seeing this type of down to earth and very real discussion truly opens your eyes to the individual in a larger historical conflict.

Being given the chance to return to Belfast with a motivated group of students was truly another fantastic experience that I couldn't be happier attending and feel very fortunate to be not only asked to attend but to be so warmly welcomed by those that worked so hard to make this program a success. The continued opportunities that this program provides people in so many different facets of life is just one of the reasons this program is not only an asset to Saint Mary's but also to the greater community of Halifax and Belfast too.

This program allows university students the chance to teach, learn, and hone their own skills in many different areas. The Saint Mary's Conflict Resolution Society has now given me two years of great experiences and opportunities and for that I am so grateful and always look forward to seeing their continued success at home and abroad. I cannot talk positively enough about this program and all that are involved in it. I am thankful to all of those that thought of me again this year and allowed me to once again be apart of their mission to continued community growth.

Thank you for all your support,

Callum Page

Student Facilitator: Carrigan Desjardins

All of our work paid off the first day we were in classes in Belfast, Ireland. From the moment I was accepted into the Conflict Resolution program until the day that I landed back in Canada this past February it was the best experience that I've had and will probably ever have in my life; and I say this with the greatest sincerity. I was very privileged to have worked with 11 other great pupils from our university here at Saint Mary's. From bake sales to bottle drives, candies and bar blitz's our team came together as one united front. Our groups and group leaders were fantastic individuals who all worked well together even in our practice runs in Halifax.

Teaching peaceful ways of resolving conflict is probably one of the hardest things I've ever had to do; but it taught me so much. I no longer felt like a hypocrite and could handle any personal or professional problem that I ran into. The work that Bridget Brownlow and Emily Anderson had us do was phenomenal and I personally think bettered us as human beings. If it wasn't for either of these women we definitely wouldn't have been able to get to Belfast as a team. Working together to solve problems peacefully allowed our group to work as one, there were no fights, tensions or conflicts because we understand how to resolve things peacefully, remain friends and are able to move forward within our group.

The peace education lessons that we gave here in Halifax was a great way to learn what we would be doing in Northern Ireland. The kids were very interactive and involved with the conflict resolution strategies that we were providing them with. However, it was a very different story once we went to Belfast. The pupils there were far more responsive to the lessons we were giving. Their examples of what conflict was proved to be more intense than any Canadian student had lived through. A lot of conflict situations that the students had experienced were of violence, often ending in death. It was clear to me right from the beginning that these students, no matter the age, had lived through more in a life time than I ever had or will. It was at that moment that the trip became very real to me and I was very thankful for the opportunity to come over to Belfast and hopefully at least change one person's life.

Spending as much time at the schools as we did was very refreshing. Being able to play with the children during their recess was just as much fun as teaching them lessons in a classroom. It was a chance for us to meet new people, hear new life stories and form trusting relationships with these students that allowed us to further our peace education practices in the classroom. It was inspirational to hear the stories of the parents and teachers who started and founded the Irish Medium schools. The struggles that these schools had to overcome in their starting years are incredible to hear. Having to rely on each other in the community, to put your entire life and faith into a school which may not

be open the next year can be scary; but, the fact that these families came together and made their dreams a reality is something that should inspire each of us in our own lives. It really shows that nothing is impossible and that if you would like to achieve something bad enough, hard work does pay off.

The benefits of this program for students in Northern Ireland are astounding. These lessons that we are coming over teaching about resolving conflict, anti-bullying practices and peace in life can hopefully be brought back to communities. If what we are doing is inspiring these pupils to teach others in their lives, less violence will happen, more solutions to problems that are arising in everyday life and peace within. If this was the case peace would start from the bottom up, it would be a community movement and not something in which the government is implementing. Which I personally believe is the starting point in Northern Ireland.

The biggest thing that I learnt from being in Belfast was that everyone has a story. That no matter what our opinions are of Belfast before we go over for our trip, they quickly leave you once you arrive. We do not know what these pupils have lived through, and what they may endure in years to come. Our trip over there is for one thing, peace. We do not go over to Ireland to form opinions, pass judgements and determine what is right and wrong. The things we come over to do will have an impact on the younger generation which will hopefully benefit them in the future. What I've brought back with me is patience, not making judgements, and careful to form opinions too early. I am very thankful for this opportunity and hope that many other students from Saint Mary's University will one day receive the same opportunity as me.

Thank you,

Carrigan Desjardins

Student Facilitator: Blake Johnston

"An experience that will stay with me for a lifetime". These words alone cannot describe my trip to Belfast. From the beginning of this project I have had past members come up to and wish me luck and say things like "you'll have an amazing time and you are so fortunate to be going". I did not think my time on this trip would be able to live up to the hype, however I came to be delighted to realize that this program changed my life and now I can pass on my passionate words about Conflict Resolution.

Leading up to our trip I was blessed with eleven great group members that quickly become my close friends that I was honoured to have teach with me. We did work in local schools which was a reward in of itself, but it was also a great learning tool. We proudly came together and fundraised to help finance our trip and this solidified us as a group of people seeking a common greater good.

Reaching Belfast came up on us quickly and we were shortly participating in group activities that highlighted Belfast's amazing culture as soon as we got there. It's a great feeling to with a group of people who genuinely want to experience another culture other than their own and let it play a part in their individual life accordingly. We had so much prior knowledge of the "Troubles" before coming to Belfast so it was hard to guess what to expect. However all the people we meet in Belfast were extremely eager to share their culture with us and their own stories which made our trip infinitely better.

The biggest thing I'm going to take away from this trip without a doubt is going into the classrooms and being able to share our workshops with the children. We had three great days in classes with the children, which I would not trade for the world. It was amazing to be in the classrooms with such receptive young minds who seemed openly excited to see us and too hear what we had to say. I personally feel that we did make an impact on these children's lives and that they will be able to take away our ideas from the workshops. This is no small statement because it means that this program as it is designed is working, and working well.

Looking back on my short time participating in Conflict Resolution I have such fond memories of my group members, the rich and extremely interesting culture of everyone I had the pleasure to meet and of course being in the classrooms and having the feeling that I was making a difference in children's lives. I am optimistic of Belfast's future and I came back to Canada with an overwhelming sense that the times after the troubles have begun and people do want to move on and strive for a better Belfast to raise their children and live their lives.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those people who continually help make this program what it is and to say that I am truly blessed to have been a part of something so special and I will take away so many aspects of this trip which will have a positive effect on my life moving forward.

Thank-you very much for all of your support,

Blake Johnston

Student Facilitator: Odane Finnegan

When they say that teaching is a two-way street it can never be clearer than when teaching children, their natural capacity for lateral thinking is their best gift and can always find an angle on a problem that never would have occurred to me. The process of teaching others is always an interesting opportunity but when that is then focused on teaching kids it is always incredible. I had the opportunity to be a teaching assistant two years ago for a business management course and what I found most surprising about that time was how much I learned teaching a class in which I was fairly confident. It came largely from the questions I was asked and having to often research the answer and being able to provide an explanation.

I have found this process works best the greater the age difference, Abraham taught me this in response to a routine question we posed to the class at Inglis Street Elementary School in Halifax. At the beginning of every workshop we opened with the question "What is conflict?" We then field various answers usually in reference to a video game system or the t.v. but at one of the first workshops Abraham put up his hand and mentioned he had heard on the news of a conflict between Israel and Palestine. This was on the heels of the UN vote of the nationhood of Palestine and as a political science student it was something I followed it closely. I was then accustomed to having various conversations about this topic but here was the rare opportunity to have this conversation with a second-grader. After our session, I brought up the issue again to see exactly what he knew about the conflict and was pleasantly surprised by how well versed he was on the topic. He knew they were fighting over land and that it had a long history behind it but his focus was more on the future of the conflict and its need to have one at all. As I began to point out the complexities of a resolution in simple terms he pointed out to me the inevitability of some solution, he couldn't then understand why it hadn't been reached yet. This is a fact that had never been come up in any of my other discussion with various people and might actually be forgotten by many.

The history is assumed by many to dictate the future but to those with a very limited reference to the past their perspective is solely future orientated, something I made an effort to apply in my studies of Northern Ireland as well as my own personal life. This was further reinforced by my many interactions while in Belfast as most people within the city have shifted their focus toward building a shared community and progressing toward a more peaceful society. With a new orientation with the problem I shifted my focus from the causes of war and separation to focusing on what the people in Belfast were doing to change the society in which they lived. I discussed plans for the future and current systems used with parties from both sides of the conflict and being able to contrast that with the results from both communities it was possible to gain a better appreciation of the past through the plans for the future.

A consistent topic was the obvious economic inequality between the two communities and the plans for remedying the situation as a route to peace. When I asked a long time Loyalist activist he said he was focused on trying to spark education as a method for economic mobility. This was due to the severe recession that had been concentrated in largely Loyalist areas lying in stark contrast to the thriving economic centers located in largely Republican areas. When this issue was broached with a Republican activist the comparison began for them with the way both sides approached confinement during the troubles. As was described by the aforementioned Loyalist supporter, they went to prison with a warrior mentality, as someone who was protecting their birthright. Republicans we're going to prison with a drastically different approach as they viewed prison as a punishment for an uprising to fight for equality, this mindset led to a motto of "educate or escape" as described by former IRA activist, Evelyn Glenholmes.

This focus on education that the Loyalist communities are now trying to develop had been apparent in the actions of their Republican adversaries since the onset of "The Troubles"; and had a large effect on their different developmental paths, and is now the hope that it could become the one thing that brings them both to parity. It was a clear cut example of the importance of a person's or community's outlook on their future. This difference has become clearer as I see more examples in my daily life and has caused me to cement my focus on what is to come with an appreciate of what has passed.

This was clearest as I walked through the downtown core and came upon a bar that had this motto painted above it, "A nation that keeps one eye on the past is wise, a nation that keeps two eyes on the past is blind." As a political science student I can see the importance of a sentiment like this for those people in Northern Ireland but I think it's true no matter who you're speaking about whether it's a nation, a people or even an individual. This was truly my greatest lesson from this trip and only one of many but I feel the most important to me and one that I hope I won't forget anytime soon.

Sincerely,

Odane Finnegan

Student Facilitator: Selvia Abdel Grawad

Experience is the best way to fully develop a deeper understanding of life. We can spend our lives learning and studying principles and other people's ideas, however, to develop your own ideology and principles you have to experience things yourself, firsthand, in order to develop your own perspective.

My name is Selvia Mohammed Abdel Gawad, a 4th year Biology/Psychology major. Based on my name, you may be able to tell that I am a Muslim and this is exactly how people are identified in Northern Ireland, based on their names. Often they are judged as soon as they introduce themselves, depending on where they are it can even become a life threatening situation.

Having studied at an Irish school in Tripoli/Libya, I was very aware of the conflict before leaving for Belfast. Issues related to the "Troubles" were very prevalent in the environment we were schooled in. Some of my teachers were very passionate about the IRA and others despised them and I could never understand why there was so much controversy.

Then comes the "Northern Ireland Conflict Resolution Program", a brilliant program that actually has a huge impact on students here in Halifax and in Belfast. The fact that Saint Mary's University provides the foundation for this program helps demonstrate how we are very active contributors on the world stage.

Meeting the people in Belfast was definitely one of the best experiences of my life - from the hostel where we stayed until the last minute we were in Northern Ireland. The smile on everyone's faces when we came in, the interest in what we had to say, you genuinely do feel the appreciation in everyone's attitudes.

Many people grew up hearing about the Troubles and the impact it had on Northern Ireland, but it's not until you actually go there that you experience the actual society and how the conflict it still impacts its citizens.

War torn, hurt and pain is what you would expect going there as portrayed on TV or assumed by most of us, however, as soon as you land, you feel the warmth, love and sometimes the pain and the hurt. It's hard to imagine what these people have been through but by actively being involved in their lives, by showing them that their pain and voices are being heard, I believe it gives them the strength and the will to go on.

The students are most definitely the best part of the experience and I will not hesitate to say that I learned so much more from them than I even imagined, the patience,

strength, discipline is exemplary, their anticipation to see that people all the way from Halifax, Canada, birth place of Justin Bieber are coming to see those children that are so isolated in their own battles within themselves.

“What team do you support” was one of the questions a little girl asked and not because she genuinely was concerned, she was very eager to know which side am I on. However after our workshop the kids were asked to draw images of peace and that girl drew both soccer teams on the paper and I asked her what it was and she answered “I’m feeling empathy”. Moments like that when you feel like you might have changed someone’s perspective and helped plant a seed that will flourish and eventually create such a huge change.

Continuity is key, the new younger generations have to see the other side of the wall, because their community and society traps them and blinds them with rage, that has been existent for a long time and with the help of this program it ensures that this continues to happen.

I will forever cherish the memories and continue to help out with this program, because I witnessed the impact it has on young children and everyone we interact with. I am so proud of belonging to a school community that encourages active involvement in the community not only in Canada but also around the world.

Thank you for everything you have done to support this brilliant program!

Selvia

Student Facilitator: Marcel Mclean

The Saint Mary's University trip to Belfast was nothing short of an experience of a lifetime. It is undoubtedly what I will look back and reflect on as the highlight of my University career for years to come. I was one of the fortunate ones chosen for the trip and I still can't believe how lucky I am for being given this opportunity. It helped me learn so much- not just about Belfast and the conflicts going on there but also important life skills of working in a group to achieve a common goal. It was clear that by the moment we arrived every minute of the hard work it took us to get there was immediately worth it. Being there first hand gives you an understanding and appreciation for what's going on that you could never get from reading a textbook or even watching a film. This was truly and educational eye-opening experience that I will always remember.

It all started in October when I met 11 new friends for the first time. It was a bit intimidating the first time I walked in the room not knowing anyone but everyone was so friendly that it was easy to get along with them. Over the next few months we saw each other at least once a week in our meetings but often at fundraisers as well. These fundraisers often served as a bonding opportunity as well as efforts towards raising money. These weekly sessions required a huge commitment and took a lot of time and effort from the whole team; from the people who coordinated and organized everything to the volunteers who actually worked the events. That was an interesting experience in itself as it gave me the opportunity to do a lot of things I had never done before. I have now worked coat checks, bake sales, and done a bar blitz and saw how generous and supportive people can be. I am glad that we did these because it gave me the opportunity to get to know some of the team members a little better as well. I think this is very important since we would be representing Saint Mary's University together in Belfast.

I really did not know what to expect in Belfast because there was much in the news about how dangerous it was more recently because of the disputes over the flag issue; but you figure people still have to go to work and get on with their daily lives so it must be somewhat safe. It was very interesting being there because you notice things that you may not pick up on by reading a book or watching a documentary about it. For example, everywhere you go from people's houses, to stores, to schools, absolutely everywhere has a fence to protect it. Also, you don't understand just how big the peace wall is and how it affects the city. I am very glad I was able to travel there with the university because had I gone on my own it would have been a much different experience. I probably would not have had the opportunity to talk to ex-prisoners or work with the children in the city. This was probably the most rewarding part of the entire trip. You realize that no matter where you go that kids are still kids. Sometimes they would give us answers that were a little shocking but kids in Canada will do the same thing. They were so friendly and happy to

have us there; it was amazing. It was great to see too that in our short one-hour workshops by the end of the session the kids actually learned something. We noticed this when we did the summary at the end, from the responses they gave us we could tell that they actually understood what we were trying to teach them. Hopefully they will remember it because I know I will always remember this experience of a lifetime.

Sincerely,

Marcel McLean