



BEYOND BASKETBALL

The Ireland Funds Support PeacePlayers'
Next Chapter In Northern Ireland





Supporters of The Ireland Funds are likely familiar with PeacePlayers International-Northern Ireland (PPI-NI), an organization that uses sport, specifically the American sport of basketball, to build relations between Catholic and Protestant kids in Northern Ireland. The Ireland Funds have supported PeacePlayers for many years but recently awarded them a Flagship Grant in support of their Champions 4 Peace Initiative (C4P).

CHAMPIONS FOR PEACE

The Champions 4 Peace (C4P) Initiative is a year-round program of training and experiential learning opportunities that teaches the next generation of young leaders to use sport to promote peace and reconciliation and to contribute to a shared future for Northern Ireland. It goes beyond bringing children from different backgrounds to play a game and it stimulates dialogue, often about contentious issues that aren't often explored in a safe and positive space.

In 2015, PPI-NI successfully engaged over 150 young people in Champions 4 Peace from some of Belfast's most notorious interface areas in constructive dialogue on contentious issues such as flags and emblems, parades and dealing with the past. PPI-NI's unique approach focuses on using sport and its inherent lessons of teamwork, cooperation and communication to challenge stereotypes while nurturing the development of positive relationships and friendships.

CHILDREN WHO PLAY TOGETHER, LEARN TO LIVE TOGETHER

"It's a very simple but powerful premise that children who play together, learn to live together," explains Gareth Harper, Managing Director of PeacePlayers Northern Ireland. "PeacePlayers has been operating in Northern Ireland since 2002. Back then it was very much an American program operating in Northern Ireland. But over the last 6 or 7 years we've been transforming the program to be a Northern Ireland program with added American value. We recognize that if we're to be sustainable, we really need to invest in local leadership and local capacity."

Today, the organization has evolved its approach while still sustaining the excitement of the early days. After a decade of work in Northern Ireland's schools, PeacePlayers is increasingly recognized as making an important contribution to the delivery of Northern Ireland's school curriculum under the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) curriculum.



"It's great that we're now being seen as key to making an important contribution to the schools," says Gareth. "All schools have to deliver the PDMU curriculum. So PeacePlayers comes in. Our job is not only working with the kids, but it's also around building the capacity of the schools to be able to continue this work themselves in the classroom. Last year, we worked with about 2,500 kids in Belfast. These are kids from interface areas where Protestants and Catholics often clash. These aren't the easy cases; they're the hard to reach kids. These are the kids that live on either side of the walls that Belfast still has sitting there."

WHEATFIELD AND HOLYCROSS – A DECADE LATER

PeacePlayers has always created a safe space on the basketball court where kids could develop relationships. But more than a decade later, the program is showing the benefits of that cultivation. Simply put, the program has worked. "Students from 2002 who followed our leadership pipeline are now working for us as coaches and facilitators back in the very communities that they come from," says Gareth. "Our key schools back then were Holycross and Wheatfield. If you recall in 2001 there were awful sectarian disputes between those two schools. There was violence."

When our program was first developing in 2002, parents insisted that the program go ahead, despite others threatening court action against the schools who bravely stepped up to engage with PeacePlayers. Then, it was about working in each of the schools separately. Would you believe we used to send two buses up to collect the kids from either side of the road and take them to a neutral spot. They travelled exactly the same road in two separate buses."

“ We are recognized as being a key component to making Northern Ireland a better place.”



“Eventually, we got to the point where they took one bus to that neutral spot. Eventually, they went into each other’s school and that was groundbreaking. They had never seen the inside of the other’s school right across the road. Now, we have those students leading programs of peace in those schools. That’s a massive, massive journey for us.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE IRELAND FUNDS THEN and NOW

“Our early funding from The Ireland Funds many years ago gave us the funding and the confidence to be able to move forward, to develop the accredited training, to develop the primary schools.

Today, the Flagship Grant couldn’t have come at a better time. We are now known as a reputable peace building program in our own right. We are

recognized as being a key component to making Northern Ireland a better place. The grant makes such a difference for us, because it once again gives us a chance to think about this wonderful model. How do we scale it up? How do we use these champions for peace that we’re growing to make our program available to even more people?”

PeacePlayers is a great program, and yes, we’ve built the reputation, but none of that could have happened without the support of The Ireland Funds.”



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