

YOUTH INITIATIVES



BRINGING TEENAGERS IN NORTHERN IRELAND TOGETHER TO TRANSFORM THEIR COMMUNITIES

"MY EXPERIENCE OF GROWING UP WAS REALLY SECTARIAN," explains Bridgette, age 16. "It was really confusing for me to know what was actually the truth."

Bridgette and her friends Rachel and Saorlaoith are growing up in Belfast exploring the question of 'truth' and what it means to be a teenager in Northern Ireland today. They explain that the ingrained sectarianism is difficult. But thanks to Youth Initiatives, a program supported by The Ireland Funds, their generation is questioning much of what it has been taught and choosing to push the boundaries of friendships that for so long have been delineated by different identities.

"We were always told, 'stay away from people who aren't like us, they're bad, they're going to be mean to you, they've done this or that to us,' says Bridgette. "Well in the past that may have happened, but here no one is doing anything to me. The girls here are as much my friends as the girl who lives next-door."

Youth Initiatives began over 25 years ago as a church mission group. Around 20 teenagers would get together on Wednesday nights with a few youth workers.

Today, close to 40 staff members and 100+ volunteers work across East Belfast, West Belfast, Downpatrick, Derry and Ballybride bringing hundreds of teenagers of diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds together six nights a week. Responsibility, character building and accountability are all emphasized across their offerings. Through arts and drama programs, outreach and summer programs, Youth Initiatives explores identity, cultural diversity and community issues. Of course to the teens, it often just begins as something cool to do on a Friday night. For many, it's their first time meeting people from another neighborhood. With the face of Northern Ireland changing through immigration, "cross-community" is no longer applicable to just religion, but ethnicity as well.

"I think this is something that young people need, especially living in Belfast, says Saorlaoith Brady, age 18, who participates in a Youth Initiatives program called Crosslinks. "We fill in evaluations after participating and I always remember this one question: 'if you hadn't been a part of Crosslinks do you think you would have been as interactive with Protestants and people from the Polish community?' I answered no I wouldn't have at all. This is the only extra-circular way I can get to know people from those communities."

Ashley Holmes began as a participant with Youth Initiatives when she was a 12. Today she has chosen to remain and work with the program that nurtured her love for the arts.

"I grew up in East Belfast in a working-class area. I came from a Protestant family. When I started coming to Youth Initiatives I was asked, 'Why are you hanging about with Catholics on a Monday night?' I remained because I wanted to work in community relations by using the arts as a tool. As a young person, Youth Initiatives gave me a place to explore dance and

music through their programs. It didn't cost anything which was good because my parents didn't have any money to pay for it."

Six nights a week the Youth Initiatives center in West Belfast is humming with activity. In one room young people begin an arts project (accompanied with the expected amount of flying paint and teens shrieking that results from a dozen teenagers involved in an arts project). Down the hall, twenty or so teenagers do a drama exercise of what it means to be from different backgrounds, followed by conversation and dialogue around those differences.

Thanks to the grant from The Ireland Funds, hundreds of young people have been able to participate in Youth Initiative's programs. Young people are creating a more inclusive truth and contributing to reconciliation in their communities, one friendship at a time.

