Field Musings

Corrymeela begins when you leave: A journey from Northern Ireland to Monterey

I am studying International Education Management at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies (MIIS), but the one class I knew I needed to take before arriving on campus was Introduction to Conflict Resolution. Why is that, when the rest of my classes cover marketing and program design and study abroad? While I can argue that conflict resolution fits in well with a career in international education, I will instead explain that my experience volunteering at a peace and reconciliation center in Northern Ireland profoundly impacted me and led to me enrolling in Introduction to Conflict Resolution, which in turn has resulted in me working with the Center for Conflict Studies and helping with its Summer Peacebuilding Program.

I stumbled across Corrymeela on Twitter when I first moved to Chile to teach English and I kept being drawn to its mission and vision during my year abroad. As soon as I returned, I applied to volunteer with this organization for three months at its center in Ballycastle. Even after a Skype interview, I did not know what to expect when I stepped off the plane. I decided that if it were terrible, it was only three months and that as a volunteer I always had the option to leave.

In the end, I only wanted to stay. When I arrived in the center’s large van, jetlagged and sleepy, I took one look around and felt so blessed to be there. Corrymeela’s residential site is two miles outside Ballycastle, a town of 10,000. It sits on a green cliff overlooking the ocean, with Rathlin Island lying six miles in the distance and Scotland visible on a clear day. Its cluster of buildings with playgrounds and a garden evoke a sense of peace and community that encourages visitors to explore them. Like almost everywhere in Northern Ireland, depending on the season, sheep fill the fields on two sides of the center.

A Presbyterian minister and his students at Queen’s University who wanted to create an open village where people of all backgrounds could learn to live together in community founded Corrymeela in
1965. Ray Davey, the minister, was deeply impacted by experiences as a prisoner of war in Germany during World War II and had thought greatly about building community amidst conflict. In Northern Ireland in the 1960s, conflict was starting to become a daily reality for the population: the violence known as the Troubles was spreading, an extension of a hundreds-year old conflict with its roots in British domination of the native Irish. While this more recent period is particularly characterized by its sectarian nature, pitting Protestants and Catholics against one another, the real problems go far beyond religion.

As it was founded as the Troubles were starting to take hold, Corrymeela has been a safe place of encounter and learning for people of all backgrounds and walks of life from across Northern Ireland and even the world. At Corrymeela everyone from the diverse group of volunteers to the visitors lives and works together on-site and is meant to reflect the values and ethos of the Corrymeela vision of community, dealing with conflict constructively and living cooperatively.

For a volunteer, what this looks like on a daily basis is leading activities for groups on residential, providing hospitality with a tea trolley, chopping and stirring while on Kitchen shift and scrubbing or “hoovering” while on Housekeeping. But beyond the daily work, I had many opportunities to learn about the conflict in a larger way. A week after I arrived many of the volunteers observed a march on July 12, a Protestant holiday commemorating the Battle of the Boyne, a battle in 1690 at which the Protestant William of Orange defeated the Catholic King James II along the river Boyne. Clearly this is a controversial celebration and our chance to attend was buttressed by discussions to help us process our experiences. I also was able to attend a talk by the Rev. Harold Good, a former center director of Corrymeela and the Protestant clergy witness to the decommissioning of the Irish Republican Army’s weapons. I visited Stormont, the seat of the Northern Ireland Assembly, with a group of young adults from Northern Ireland and Israel. And I listened to two ex-prisoners,
paramilitaries from both sides during the Troubles, talk about their lives and their roads to renouncing violence.

These experiences and many more gave me an outsider’s insight into the conflict in Northern Ireland. The work that volunteers do at Corrymeela gave me a taste of how structured encounters and activities and discussions can lead to barriers slowly being broken, piece by piece. And more than anything, all of these experiences taught me how hard and long peace is. Hanging over the door in the Main House is a sign that says, “Corrymeela begins when you leave.” The challenge is for everyone who comes to this special place to take the knowledge and understanding they gained out into the real world, which is no easy feat anywhere but particularly not in a divided place like Northern Ireland. This phrase for me reflects the incremental work of peacebuilding and the importance of all the actions, large and small, that we as individuals can take to breaking down barriers.

Fast forward two years to my Introduction to Conflict Resolution class. I quickly became known for my passion for Northern Ireland and soon no one was surprised when I would add to discussions with examples or stories from my time there. What I appreciated most was that I had real life knowledge to illustrate theories I was learning in class, and that I was finally able to give some theoretical frameworks to all I had seen and heard. I may be studying International Education Management, but I will find a way to incorporate what I learned in Northern Ireland and at MIIS about conflict into my future career.

Kimberly is currently studying for her MA in International Education Management at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies. She interned as Program Assistant with the Center for Conflict Studies. She has worked for a congresswoman in Washington, D.C., taught English in Chile and volunteered at a peace and reconciliation centre in Northern Ireland. Her passion is promoting understanding through international and intercultural exchange.

Are you interested in understanding conflict and peace in Northern Ireland?

Are you eager to visit Corrymeela?

Are you motivated to explore organizations working on peace and reconciliation?

Are you keen to develop field research skills?

YES!!

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“Challenges to Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland”

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