Working in Canada

An Irish Perspective

by Fiona MacCool

L'auteure rapporte sa conversation avec cinq jeunes femmes de Belfast Est qui participent à un programme d'expérience de travail en vue d'un emploi à Toronto.

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On a beautifully hot June evening, on the eighteenth floor of an apartment building overlooking the Toronto skyline, I am smoking, talking, and scribbling madly with five young women from East Belfast. The daughter of an immigrant from Northern Ireland, I am accustomed to sitting around a table discussing "the troubles." What I am not used to however, is being the oldest one at the table, and one of the only Catholics. Frustrated by a media that only shows us the bad news of Northern Ireland, superficially focussing exclusively on political posturing and violence, I am eager to talk with women both Catholic and Protestant, of a new generation. As the hours pass I am impressed by their candour, their enthusiasm for life, and their commitment to peace and reconciliation in their homeland. Madly trying to record their words and decipher their accents, I am exceedingly relieved that they are so articulate, and so willing to share their experiences.

Sponsored by the Irish Canadian Development Institute, these five women are participants in the 1997 Community Care Work Experience Program. Selected by public advertising, referrals, and interviews in Belfast and Dublin, they are part of a group of 20 young people, the majority of whom are unemployed back home, who are placed in either an eight- or 12-week work experience in Toronto to acquire skills which may help them get permanent jobs in Ireland. The program vows to broaden participants' world view by working and socializing together and experiencing the multicultural environment of Toronto.

Kerry Boyd supervises the group on their placement in Toronto. She was a participant in a similar program in Holland. She is from East Belfast, is 25 years old, and has her two-year-old son, Jake, with her.

Claire Armstrong is 22 years old and is also from East Belfast. She heard about the program through Kerry and read about it in the paper. Back home, she really enjoyed working with children with disabilities on a temporary work placement. In Toronto, she is working with Easter Seals in the resource library, which she enjoys because she is picking up computer and administrative skills. This will help when she enrolls in an introductory computer course back home.

Jacqueline Boyd is 20 years old. She is Kerry's sister and is here minding Jake. She is having a great time exploring Toronto when Kerry is home with Jake.

Diane Keys is 22 years old. She resides in East Belfast but grew up 20 miles south of there in a rural community. She has a degree from Queen's University (Belfast) in Geology, but like the others, had no work experience or practical skills for finding a job. Her placement is with the Metro Toronto Conservation Centre. She spends most of her time leading educational tours at the waterfront and is also compiling information for final environmental reports. She is learning to water-ski.

Cathy Catney is 20 and is also from East Belfast. She is the only Catholic in the group. She started her placement in a travel agency, but didn't like it. She now works at a daycare centre and is really enjoying it. She has a six-month-old daughter named Caitlan who is staying with her Granny while she is away.

When I asked about the selection process, Kerry informs me that young people who had never travelled would have been given preference but in the end they didn't receive that many applications. The group in the Republic had lots of applicants to choose from, but in East Belfast it was hard to find people.

This surprised me considering that in Canada, if there had been a subsidized program for youth to go to Ireland, I would have been one of many to jump at the opportunity. The women explain that many Catholics would be nervous to leave a Catholic area to mix with others in a foreign land. In fact, Kerry tells me, those from the Short Strand (a Catholic neighbourhood in Belfast) dropped out of the program early on, experiencing trouble adjusting.

Claire remarked that she had expected Toronto to be more of an urban chaos and was surprised to find it didn't feel like a huge city, even though she had never been anywhere so big. I note that the program literature mentions the importance of "cross-community, cross-border working partnerships to increase understanding and reconciliation" and wonder what this means to them. Kerry explains that in preparing to embark on the program, the group of youth from the Republic and the Catholics and Protestants from the North lived together in the Peace and Reconciliation Center for six weeks.

What are the differences between you in the North, and the other participants from the Republic? What are the similarities?

Kerry explains, "When I was doing exercises to prepare for this program we went down to Wicklow (County, in the South) and divided up into two groups, one from the North and one from the South and were asked what was different about the other. Both groups said they thought of the other as being 'tougher,' 'meaner.' It was a good exercise to see that the differences aren't that great."

Before this program started, Diane had never been to the South, and had been raised in a rural community isolated from Catholics. Kerry and Jacqueline come from a mixed marriage, so were not isolated from Catholics, despite their chiefly Protestant upbringing. While Cathy was raised and educated to be Catholic, she is also from a mixed marriage. Claire grew up in a middle-class area of Protestant Belfast, but went to an integrated school in Belfast, the first of its kind.

Although these girls want peace above all else, they are not particularly convinced that their generation has improved over the last when it comes to being divided by hatred. "I think the role of peer educators is key in teaching the youth about the issues."

Do you think integrated schools are a good step toward breaking down hatred between Catholics and Protestants?

Claire is very enthusiastic on this point, saying, "Oh definitely, ... I'd say so. I was never raised to hate Catholics or anything, but for my first term of high school I was in a Protestant school and by Christmas I was starting to be prejudiced myself against them. I think integration and education is the only way to resolve the troubles. Now we have a choice, to study Irish history rather than only British, and to learn the Gaelic language."

While Kerry and her sister Jacqueline were raised without formal religion, because of their mixed background, however, they were often called "Fenian lovers." Kerry recalls watching the stoning of buses of Catholic children as they drove through her neighbourhood.

How do these divisions play themselves out in the University?

Diane recalls that it seemed as if "there were more Protestant students than Catholics but it only became noticeable when the local student wing of Sinn Fein or the Ulster Defence League would be trying to recruit new members. At the university level it also became clear to me that the more rural, the more prejudiced people are toward one another."

In Northern Ireland, the girls explain that university tuition is free but only 22 per cent of high school students go on to attend a post-secondary institution. At eleven years of age you must choose to do your A or GCSE levels which will decide whether you are streamed toward university or toward a trade. Getting admitted to university is extremely difficult and competitive.

Grammar school, which Diane attended, streams students toward university, but in public school this is not the case as Kerry complains, "The idea is ... if your mum worked in a chip shop, so should you." Kerry has been accepted to attend university as a mature student.

The education system is a breeding ground for prejudice as Kerry explains: "The teachers are the biggest part of the problem in the North. People who are educated should know better. One time I got a placement for school at a nursing home out in the country run by nuns and one of my teachers, a man with a PhD in education, warned me about mixing with the dirty Fenians." Cathy, who attended Catholic school got harassed from other students. She recalls "What they'd say to me is, ... 'what are doing hanging with them Orangies?'"

Do any of you see yourselves as part of a single nation, or do you think the island has become two distinct countries?

Claire speaks up, "I say I'm from Ireland, and that I'm Northern Irish." The girls all agree that they call themselves Irish, but agree that in Canada they have to say Northern first so that people do not misunderstand what they mean. In stark contrast to my relatives some of whom remember, and all of whom dream of a united Ireland, this seems not to really be an issue for them. They neither dread nor look forward to it. Cathy explains, "Some Catholics don't even want a united Ireland any more." Diane is less ambivalent than the others, firmly declaring "I wouldn't want a united Ireland. It wouldn't bring peace, but chaos economically and legally. The violence wouldn't stop because of it." Kerry, in the mediating pose she assumes so well, concludes "Let's say in an ideal world yes, we would want to live in a united Ireland, but that is not the world we live in."

How do you think your generation has come to see partition? Are you more or less divided on these issues than your parents?

Although these girls want peace above all else, they are not particularly convinced that their generation as a whole has improved over the last when it comes to being divided by hatred. Kerry is encouraged though, as she says "I think the role of peer educators is key in teaching the youth about the issues. We teach conflict resolution and invite open discussion so that young people hear more than their family prejudice."

Kerry also explains that one of the misconceptions that these discussions reveal is the idea held among some Catholics from the North and South that Protestants are all well off, that Catholics are the only ones suffering.

The girls describe the situation in Protestant neighbourhoods, particularly in the public housing areas where Ulster terrorist groups control the drug trade by selling and "disciplining" other pushers with brutal beatings. Cathy in turn comments on the IRA's strict stand on drug enforcement including the knee-capping anyone caught

dealing drugs in Catholic areas. "The IRA will also give a beating to the 'hoots' (hoodlums) for stealing cars and going joy riding, which is a big problem among the youth in the neighbourhood looking for a thrill."

The police force in Northern Ireland known as the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary) have, since the troubles, only policed Protestant areas after being forced by the IRA to stay out of the Catholic strongholds. Despite this issue of jurisdiction however, Claire comments, "In Ulster Protestant areas the unionist terrorist groups also do discipline, even with the RUC." The girls describe the Protestant estate housing, the presence of unofficial "bosses," and their thugs who run the place. Kerry complains "You see these thugs parading around threatening everyone and you just know it will be the biggest, stupidest thugs you knew in school who are being told what to think and don't have the brains to have any ideas of their own."

Kerry and Jacqueline often consider emigrating. But Kerry adds, "We have it better in Belfast. At least at home when you're on welfare you're well taken care of, free child care, dental health, education ... here you're done for if you're poor."

Cathy also talks about how in the Catholic nationalist areas, "all it takes is a look from the IRA or someone from the Worker's Party and your family will be run out of town."

Hatred runs deep in the North, as Kerry describes an encounter with a Protestant woman who "refused to let her three-year-old attend an integrated nursery school just because she would come into contact with Catholics, and this was a woman no older than me."

"The fact remains," Kerry concludes "that the poorer you are, the more likely you have to live in public housing, the more likely you are to be consumed with hate."

Diane adds, "People out in the country are also more set in their ways. I knew people back home that would ride 20 miles out of their way to avoid going by a row of 5 Catholic houses."

As I listen to them tossing back tales of IRA knee cappings and UDF (Ulster Defense Force) murders, I am struck by their casual manner. Like my aunt who grew accustomed to the sounds of Derry bars and shops being blown to bits, these dangers and tragedies are threads in the fabric of their experience of home, just as homelessness and long winters are in mine. These hazards become a nuisance to avoid, or a situation to explain to a young Canadian interviewer trying to get it all on paper fast enough.

Nell McCafferty once said "Women of the South are concerned with quality of life, but women of the North have to be concerned with life itself." What reaction do you have to this?

As far Claire is concerned, "Women seem to bond together more in the North." Kerry agrees that the North is a place full of strong and independent women, for she explains, "Women do all the community-based work at home."

Are you feminists? What does the term mean to you?

An instant unanimous shaking of heads and shrugging of shoulders follows my question. Where Kerry works back home, she tells me, it's a big joke that she is a feminist. They tease her because she is tough and gives some of the men there a hard time.

"It's not really an issue for us" seems to be the general consensus, as they unanimously agree that more men are helping with the kids and doing housework these days. Diane is encouraged by the fact that "it's more equal between men and women now that all the women are working."

None of them feel any pressure to have children or big families. Claire proclaims with a smile "I may not be a feminist, but I don't need a man taking care of me."

Would any of you want to emigrate?

Claire is quick to respond, "Sure now we've been telling you bad things, but there is nowhere else I'd rather live than Ireland. It's my home and I think it's the best place in the world."

Kerry and Jacqueline were born in Canada and often consider emigrating to Vancouver. But Kerry waivers, adding, "We have it better in Belfast than we would here. You don't find homeless people sleeping on the ground at home. At least at home when you're on welfare you're well taken care of, free child care, free dental health, free education ... here you're done for if you're poor."

Diane feels differently, quietly saying "I'd emigrate ... just because I can't see myself living in Belfast in another 5 years. I'd probably go to Europe or North America."

Would any of you live in England?

This question is answered with a resounding "no!," followed by comments like "They have nothing there for us."

The press coming out of Ireland recently has spoken of the Republic being in an economic boom. Is this a reality that you feel in the North?

Kerry comments, "In East Belfast there is a lot of money for government-sponsored grants and programs. If you have an idea to start up a program, you get the money." The girls explain that while more companies are expanding, they are all looking for people with years of work experience which is hard to get. The European Economic Community has established the International Fund for Ireland, but as far as these girls can see, no permanent jobs seem to be coming out of it. Diane comments on how the government has spent loads of money fixing up the waterfront and building a concert hall which may help. The cease-fire last year helped the economy, but as a result, the girls tell me, the price of housing in Belfast has tripled.

What future do you see for the North? What are the prospects for peace?

For Kerry the purpose of her counselling work leaves her unequivocal on this point, "Peer counselling and education is the key, going to the streets and the pool halls and giving people something to do, and inviting them to contribute to discussions about politics. We need to make politics more interesting to young people, many of whom have a lot to say."

Claire adds, "Courses like this help a great deal toward making things better in the future."

What role can the economy or education play in promoting peace? What else can bring people together?

For Claire, "Integrated education is very important." Diane agrees, saying, "In university, because everyone isn't wearing school uniforms, clothing no longer becomes an identity badge. People can get to know one another on another level." Claire adds, "Another important thing is bringing in more equal opportunity hiring laws, so that the box you check off on your job application asking what school you went to doesn't decide whether or not you get it."

How do you react to the way your culture is perceived here in Canada?

The girls smile as they recalled going to see the film *The Van*, an adaptation of the story by East Dublin writer Roddy Doyle, finding it peculiar that the audience was "raging with laughter at things we thought were normal."

The girls tell me they have found that practically every Canadian is at least part Irish, so people are very friendly and keen to find out more about where in Ireland they live. All the girls have found however, that once they say Northern Ireland, Canadians generally "hush right up" and get uncomfortable asking any more questions.

Diane is the only participant in the group to have had a bad experience confronting Canadian prejudice. When she was working down by the waterfront speaking to a group of primary school kids, a teacher heard her accent and confronted her, asking, "Are you from good Ireland, or bad Ireland." When Diane told him she was from Northern Ireland, he grabbed the group of kids and ushered them right away from her in disgust. Recalling the incident Diane explains, "I was really upset, but you know, with someone that ignorant, it does no good to say anything so you just try to forget about it."

Claire smiles as she recalls overhearing some people at her work placement talking about her behind her back. One asked the other where she was from, and when they heard Belfast said, "Well, she must be used to ducking."

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DONA STURMANIS

41: immortal

I.

The delirious orange red yellow of aspens
the moment before all leaves fall

Where are those red berries?
Must find those red berries
buried in the middle
of flaming yellow leaves.

Quick, pick them up—
they're still loud lemon.

Quick, quick, press them
into waxed paper
at fullest bloom of colour.
Seal them immortal.

All this
late autumn drama
before the first snowstorm.

II.

High in September Rockies,
you're driving too fast.
Stop. I'll stick my face
in that burning bush.

Freeze, freeze, me in the frame:
set me on fire
in this autumn colour,
capture me on the film.

I want to be preserved
iridescent and screaming
before I go.

Dona Stumanis recently bought a house with her husband, Stu, and her 14-year-old son, Leif, in Peachland, British Columbia, the tiny, perfect town in the valley of their dreams. She has spent 25 years working professionally as a journalist, editor, publisher, and writing instructor. She has been published in several journals, including New Quarterly, White Wall Review, Antigonish Review, Grain, *and* Dandelion. *Her second chapbook,* The Book of Death, *will be published this fall* (The Word is Out Press).