

The Washington Times

Kids of 9/11 dead camp with teen victims of terror



In this photo taken Tuesday, Aug. 3, 2010, Mary Seaman, left, from New York and Kristen Roche from Connecticut visit murals on the Falls Road in West Belfast, Northern Ireland. Teenagers who lost loved ones in acts of terror worldwide are camping together this week in Northern Ireland as they learn to move beyond their grief and become peacemakers themselves. (AP Photo/Peter Morrison)

By Shawn Pogatchnik - Associated Press

1:53 p.m., Wednesday, August 4, 2010

DUBLIN (AP) — Teenagers who lost loved ones in acts of terror and civil strife worldwide are camping together this week in Northern Ireland as they learn to move beyond their grief — and become peacemakers themselves.

The project, sponsored chiefly by the post-9/11 charity Tuesday's Children, involves 65 teens who have lost parents or other relatives in a wide range of terror attacks and ethnic conflicts.

Half of the campers had family members killed in the Sept. 11, 2001, al-Qaida attacks on the World Trade Center. Some come from opposite sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Others are Spaniards targeted by the Basque separatist group ETA.

Alongside arts, crafts, sports and tourism, the kids are receiving trauma counseling and coaching from Harvard Law School specialists in the arts of negotiation and mediation.

The kids don't all speak English, and their daily lives might be worlds apart. But veterans of the annual camp — called Project Common Bond, and being held outside the United States for the first time — say such differences are minor compared to what they share.

"A lot of the most important communication in these camps is nonverbal. I experienced it straight on and it's extraordinary," said New York native Caitlin Leavey, 19, who participated in the two U.S. camps as well as the Belfast gathering. "The language barrier does not take away from creating friendships."

Her father, Lt. Joseph G. Leavey, died on 9/11 when he led firefighters from Ladder 15 into the south tower of the World Trade Center before its collapse.

Leavey said she's trying to honor her father's memory by training to become a conflict-resolution expert — both formally as a sophomore at New York University and informally by making friends in faraway conflict zones.

"Dad was always big about community and talking to everyone. He loved saving people," she said. "The Common Bond camps are all about that too. You help people who've been through terrible hurts to open up, to relieve themselves of this burden. It's still hard for me to talk about losing my father but I'm trying, and at the camp you find yourself surrounded by young people in exactly the same boat as yourself. It's powerful."

Britain's secretary of state for Northern Ireland, Owen Paterson, invited the campers to the government headquarters Wednesday on a hill overlooking Belfast and lauded their resilience.

"The contrast between the positive hope and inspiration of these young people and the emptiness of those who visited evil upon them could not be more stark," he said.

On Tuesday, the campers and 35 counselors toured the famed murals that enliven rival British Protestant and Irish Catholic districts of Belfast — tough neighborhoods still separated by dozens of high security walls called "peace lines." Even some of the Northern Ireland campers, hailing from rural towns and villages with their own murderous legacies, had never seen them in person.

"People are worried that 'the troubles' could return," said Davina Whiteside, 17, a camper from Armagh, Northern Ireland.

In 1975 an Irish Republican Army gunman killed her grandfather Joe, a part-time British soldier, on the doorstep of the family home in front of Davina's mother. She was born the year before the IRA's first lengthy cease-fire in 1994 inspired a slow-blooming peace process.

That peace today is far from perfect. Much of Northern Ireland remains divided on political, cultural and religious lines, and truce-breaking IRA dissidents remain active in targeting police and soldiers.

Hours before the campers toured Belfast, IRA dissidents detonated a car bomb outside the main police station in Londonderry, a city on the other side of Northern Ireland, damaging buildings but injuring nobody. On Wednesday an army officer found a booby-trap bomb under his car.

"Recently a lot of trouble has been bubbling up with the IRA dissidents. I don't know if the conflict has truly been solved. There's lots of ifs and buts," Whiteside said. "I worry sometimes that people from my side of the community will decide to fight back again like before. The one side here always wants to provoke the other."

Whiteside, who also attended last year's camp in Pennsylvania, said the Tuesday's Children camps are special because she feels free to share her deepest feelings and fears.

"My mother and sisters were never able to talk so openly like this," Whiteside said. "In Common Bond you're actually given space and freedom to express how you're feeling, which is not the done thing in Northern Ireland."

From their weeklong base at Queen's University in Belfast, the campers expect to learn from their Northern Ireland hosts, who are emerging from nearly four decades of conflict that left 3,700 dead and maimed tens of thousands more.