

**Ten Years of Recovery: Healing Processes in Post-Conflict Northern Ireland**  
**Belfast, Northern Ireland**  
**Denison University, Granville, OH**  
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### **I. Project Summary**

Over the course of two months in Belfast, we attempted to observe specific aspects of Northern Irish life and their relationship to the country's progress towards peaceful reconciliation. As student journalists, our intentions are twofold: first, to document these ongoing processes, and second, to educate others about the experiences of a nation attempting to emerge from an armed conflict.

Upon our arrival, we quickly isolated the facets of modern Northern Irish society that would receive the majority of our attention for the next two months. Ian chose to photograph a variety of representations of the conflict, including political murals, marches, and Protestant religious and political holidays. These events, historically flashpoints for sectarian violence, have begun to function primarily as manifestations of remembrance and pride for the citizens of Northern Ireland. Kara conducted a journalistic study of modern politics in Northern Ireland by interviewing major political party representatives, scholars, and former paramilitary members regarding the past, current and future state of Northern Ireland. This research was then summarized in a 15-page summary of her experiences and conclusions.

Our stay in Belfast was a phenomenal experience. We had a chance to observe the gap between two sides of a bitter conflict and help in the search to eradicate its root causes – all while refining our own skills as journalists. We were also able to identify methods of reconciliation that have been effective and residual elements of resentment and distrust that continue to exist. Most crucially, we looked for aspects of the Troubles and the peace process that could be applied toward other sectarian conflicts.

### **II. Experiences & Logistics**

Preparing a precise methodology prior to leaving for Belfast proved nearly impossible. Although we sketched a rough proposal of how our research would be conducted, it didn't prepare us for many of the cultural circumstances and idiosyncrasies we encountered. One of the first crucial lessons we learned was that if there's a part of your project you can complete before you leave, make sure to do so. We had decided to distribute our combined findings via an informational website, but found it absolutely impossible to complete any substantive work on it while gathering research in Belfast. Working with friends on web development at home has cut costs, but also delayed the publication and dissemination of our work.

Another discovery we made was the importance of establishing an effective method of communication with interviewees. For example, we differed greatly on our preferences of initiating contact with the interviewees. Ian preferred to go to organizations and agencies prior to any initial contact or preparation and present himself in person to request and schedule a meeting. Although making a presence proved to be more personal and upfront than an email, the method of not notifying the interviewees before visiting sometimes led to ineffective encounters, or no encounters at all. Kara adapted a system of forewarning, and often emailed contacts several times before meeting, as well as preparing a series of questions. This method was both more time-consuming and impersonal, but proved to be reliable in securing concrete interview slots.

A third aspect we didn't fully anticipate was the value of being located in the area of our study and personalized, face-to-face dialogue with our subjects. Prior to this trip, our experience with journalism was largely confined to work on the campus newspaper. Venturing into West Belfast, a highly segregated

area, forced us to expand our comfort zone and our curiosity. Living in Belfast opened our eyes, exposing us to a degree of reality that would have been unattainable from academic or literary resources. In terms of personal development, it is hard to overemphasize the value of daily interaction with people from across the socioeconomic and political spectrum. By working with a wide range of interviewees, we learned to strike a balance between asking difficult, important questions and maintaining a degree of sensitivity.

Although we ran into some surprises and difficulties in preparation, many of them turned out for the better. For example, we were pleasantly surprised at our ease in organizing basic necessities such as housing and Internet on the ground in Belfast. Davis Projects for Peace's generous grant gave us some flexibility in housing and food options, even with the U.S. dollar's precipitous decline during our trip. We were also able to fully utilize the voice recorder and camera lens funded by the program, without which many of our ventures would have been impossible. Rather than spending time and effort securing our basic needs, we were immediately free to pursue our interests and advance the project.

One of the most important preparations we made was the selection of specific focal areas out of a vast array of topics within the potential scope of our study. Hundreds of books have been written on the Northern Irish conflict, and our first instinct was to pay attention to every topic that seemed worth our attention. When we began dealing with the realities of coordinating a project with concrete time and money constraints, we realized that we would have to specialize if we were to create work of any relevance. As soon as we were able to establish specific foci, it became much easier to establish a course of action.

For journalism to be of any use, people have to be able to read it. After much discussion, we concluded that the Internet was the best medium of distribution for our work. This decision was made primarily in consideration of the Internet's accessibility and flexibility. Interested parties anywhere in the world will be able to view our findings and our photos, and hopefully to gain insight into the life of a nation recovering from sectarian conflict. Additionally, our work relies variously on text, imagery, and sound, and the Internet is an ideal venue for multimedia presentation. We anticipate that the website will be operational by the end of 2008.

Already, organizations are beginning to express interest in the work we did in Belfast. Chris O'Halloran, director of a non-profit organization called the Belfast Interface Project, has asked for permission to use photos from West Belfast in research publications on various social issues in Northern Ireland. Our hope is that other organizations will follow suit and that our findings can contribute to ongoing efforts to understand and eradicate sectarian conflicts worldwide.

