

'A common bond of loss' Young adults united in program to bring peace, end conflict

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Newburyport Daily News

July 20, 2012



Byfield- Growing up, the friendship that Dubhaltach Mulvenna and Davina Whiteside share would have seemed impossible. Few families in Ireland were spared the violence that stemmed from The Troubles, the decades-long conflict Northern Ireland that resulted in the deaths of over 3,500 people. As a result, both Mulvenna, from Ireland, and Whiteside, from Northern Ireland, grew up in an environment where the other side was viewed with suspicion, contempt and hatred. Had fate not intervened, they would likely have turned out no different. But three years ago, the two met at a program in Belfast for teens who have lost a close family member to an act of terrorism or as a result of a global conflict, and they found that their people had more in common than they thought.

That program was Project Common Bond, and this year Mulvenna and Whiteside, now 19, are among the 75 young adults from around the world who have been united through the nine-day peace-building and conflict resolution program put on by Tuesday's Children, a nonprofit organization that serves the needs of people affected by terrorism, and hosted by The Governor's Academy in Byfield.

Project Common Bond, now in its fifth year, ran from July 12-20 and aims to help young adults who have been impacted by global conflict become leaders of peace in their own countries by helping them come to terms with their own experiences and giving them the skills they need to make a difference in the lives of others. The program emphasizes the Dignity Model, developed by Donna Hicks of Harvard's Weatherhead Center of International Affairs.

Yarden Ben Ozer, a 16-year-old girl from Israel, said that Project Common Bond gave her the chance to meet people like her all over the world and provided everyone there a chance to reflect on the past and learn how to become leaders of a new generation of peace.

"I'm going to come back home with a lot of knowledge about other countries all over the world and their conflicts, and how they deal with conflict," Ben Ozer said. "I believe that peace is a realistic thing after being here."

In addition to knowledge and skills, the program also gave the participants a sense of community. Despite all the differences in culture and language, each participant could relate to one another because of their experiences, which are not easily shared with people who haven't been victims themselves.

"All of the participants have a common bond loss," said Terry Sears, executive director of Tuesday's Children. "That's what really unites them and brings them together."

"What makes it different is that we lost a loved one to an act of terrorism and hatred," said Robert Mathai of Arlington, a sophomore at Tufts University. "Everyone will lose someone that they love through acts of God and whatnot, illness, old age, but we're different because somebody killed someone that we care about."

Many of the American participants lost family members on Sept. 11, and participants from other countries have experienced loss as a result of their own country's conflicts. For example, Mulvenna's uncle was shot dead by the British army in 1973, and members of the Irish Republican Army killed Whiteside's grandfather in his own home. Some participants from other countries had relatives who were killed by the Taliban, and a few were even injured in terrorist attacks themselves.

"You can't hold them culpable just because they were taught something incorrect," Mathai said. "You have to realize that you can go beyond that and that killing someone else will not make you any happier and it won't make the world a better place. You have to transcend all of that hatred."

Now, young adults from conflicting countries like Israel and Palestine or Ireland and Northern Ireland can return home and spread word of their experiences, hoping one day to help end the violence and bring about a lasting peace.

"If it wasn't for Project Common Bond, I wouldn't be the person I am today, and (Dubhaltach and I) wouldn't be friends," Whiteside said.

Once they get home, Mulvenna and Whiteside hope to establish a program in Ireland called Common Difference, which will bring young people from both sides together and show them that they're not really so different. Through the friendships that result, the pair hopes that peace can be achieved.

"I believe that's the way we're going to achieve peace," Mulvenna said. "You're not going to hurt your friends."