

Hosting Teens for Peace

Tom McCarthy

Almost every July for over 25 years families from St. John's have hosted a pair of teens --- one from each side of a conflict --- as part of a unique and significant peace-making program. Away from the animosity and strife back home, the teens get to know and respect each other, question the "need" to continue the hatred of the past and often become good friends. Upon their return home the pair usually introduce their friends to each other, share insights learned and engage in peacemaking efforts. Chosen for their leadership potential, the teens help to change the attitude of their generation.

When St. John's first entered this peace-making effort the focus was on being part of the Children's Friendship Program for Northern Ireland (CFPNI), by having a family host a Catholic and Protestant teen from Northern Ireland during the time of "the troubles." After about 15 years of such programming and the growth of the participating teens into young adult leaders of their country's peace process, it was determined that bringing teens to the neutral territory of the US was no longer necessary because similar programming was then able to occur in Northern Ireland.

The leaders of CFPNI, all of whom were (and continue to be) unpaid volunteers, brought a similar program to the troubled island of Cyprus. Since the 1974 civil war the island has been divided between Greek Christians and Turkish Muslims. In 2008 the Cyprus Friendship Program (CFP) was formed and St. John's has been a mainstay from the beginning by supplying host families and helping to pay for transportation and insurance. Here is a 2014 video from WJZ-TV in Baltimore highlighting one of the parish's host families and their guest teens.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqlOATr1t6o&t=4s>

The reader might also appreciate two specific occurrences that stick in my mind about the teens' visits to Maryland which highlight how the experience made a difference in their lives:

One boy from Northern Ireland confided to me at the end of his visit that he had been planning to join his cousins in a para-military group that was shooting and bombing those on "the other side". He pretended that he was interested in advancing peace so that he could join the program and get a free trip to America. As a result of his participation he decided that he was going to defy his cousins and not take up arms. I remained in touch with him for several years; he kept his promise.

In another year, during a group discussion with the Cypriot teens staying in Maryland, the boys from each side talked about how they would be drafted to serve in the military. "They're going to teach us how to kill one another," one boy said, prompting a profound silence and more than a few moist eyes. Some said they would refuse to shoot, but weren't sure what they'd do when it was said they might be hanged for that. Finally, to an applause of relief, it was decided that they would all miss on purpose.

Because significant improvement has been made in Cyprus, CFP leaders have just begun to take the program to Israel/Palestine. In July 2018, St. John's helped lead the introduction of this effort. The parish had a volunteer host family, provided space for Maryland host families to have their Orientation Session, and held a social ministry box collection to help fund the effort.

Families wishing to learn more about the possibility of hosting teens each July should contact Fr. Bowen or myself.