



Irish Youth Foundation

Giving Ireland's most disadvantaged children a safer, happier start to their lives.

The Irish Youth Foundation has been working since 1985 to address the needs of Ireland's children living in at-risk environments. They support numerous grassroots projects across the island of Ireland that help young people who are facing adversity in their lives. The organization currently has two broad goals: **to provide safe places where children can go after school to grow, learn, and play;** and secondly **to provide opportunities for teenagers from under-served communities to succeed and excel in their lives.** A grant from The Ireland Funds is supporting this work. Director of Development, Niall McLoughlin, tells us about serving Ireland's children in the challenging environment faced by Ireland's not-for-profit sector.



Q. What are some of the challenges faced by the children you work with?

A. For many of the children we help, their own parents may not have finished school or may have a poor educational background. There is often generational unemployment and addiction, substance abuse and poverty are daily realities for many. We find that the transition from primary school to secondary school is a crucial and often a pretty daunting time in a young person's life. If the family support is not there to answer questions about the new challenges and realities of secondary school life, it is very easy for kids to be thrown off the positive educational path they are on. And in our experience it's not that they drop out in first year or second year (although some do), but many kids disengage from school at this time if there is nobody there to give them direction. Often nobody is there when they come home from school, nobody to make dinner, nobody to help with homework and nobody to answer questions. So basically the support that they need to successfully make that transition isn't there. This is where the projects we support are so effective. They provide a hot meal for the kids, they provide mentoring for them, provide homework help and most importantly they provide time, love and encouragement. They give them the support that they need and walk them through the difficult transition between primary and secondary school.

Q. What are some of the other projects you're supporting?

A. Another project that we're proud of at the moment is an inner city Dublin youth bike program. It is using bicycles to attract a different demographic of disadvantaged kids, 14-15 year old boys, which the homework clubs are finding difficulty to engage. The program is teaching kids how to build bikes from scratch and then how to maintain them. Kids want "fixie" bikes which have become quite cool, but they cost about €400. The youth club, luckily, had a really, really good mechanic who was able to show them how to go from an old frame to basically building their own bike.

Once they're inside the walls of the youth club, they can let their own defenses down. These are the sort of guys who normally wouldn't talk about addiction issues or problems at home or family issues they have, but once they are inside, it's a safe environment and they open up. Also, they actually get a concrete skill, so they're learning how to become bicycle mechanics. With the huge demand for bicycle mechanics in Ireland, it's a real and concrete skill that they wouldn't otherwise have. The police have noted the decrease in crime since the bike project has started, which also speaks volumes. It is a project we'd like to see replicated in Cork, Galway, Waterford and beyond.



Q. How are The Ireland Funds helping The Irish Youth Foundation?

A. **The Ireland Funds are almost like a big brother to us.** I would love to spend 50% of our time raising money and 50% of our time giving it out, but the reality is that is never going to happen. We spend about 80% of our time trying to raise the funds and it's increasingly difficult. So to have the support of The Ireland Funds to fund our projects is really important because it gives us time to come to the projects. It gives us time to understand what the needs are. That's as important as the money itself. Time is very important and it frees us up as we're a very small organization. We try and reach as many kids as possible around the country so really, the support of The Ireland Funds is vital to us.

Q. What are your hopes for the children you work with?

A. Everybody knows the country has been through a recession. When we look at Ireland now, those on the margins of society were hit the hardest. Hopefully we're on the up now and things are getting a bit more positive, but it's really investing in the children that's going to make that work. If we can take children out of that deprivation, and away from the problems that come with poverty, we can give them opportunity, education, time, and attention, they will turn their energies into positive energies instead of negative energies. What we have found is that when you invest time, money, and your own energies into the lives of these children, they really flourish. They turn around, and they can do some fantastic things.

I'll never forget one boy who benefited from one of the projects which The Ireland Funds helped fund. He said the bravest thing he had to do was walk in through the door. Because he said there were other guys his own age, who were outside, who weren't into the youth club. And he had to put his head down and walk past them. But once he did, his life turned around because he could take his defenses down, he could take the shields down, and he could open up about his problems at home and the addiction that his family had. He did a leadership course. He is now working with the other children in the program. He's a positive force within the area. **To change the life of a child is a very tangible and rewarding thing.**