

# NEW CONVERSATIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

With help from  
The Ireland Funds,  
Street Talk brings  
young people  
together with local  
police to break  
down barriers  
and build trust.

## MAGHERAFELT STRABANE DERRY/LONDONDERRY LIMAVADY

These are communities and towns around Derry/Londonderry that have traditionally experienced tension not only between their Catholic and Protestant communities, but also between young people and the police. Can animation, cans of spray paint and teaching DJ skills tackle anti-social behavior? The Street Talk project thinks so.

# THE PLAYHOUSE

in Derry/Londonderry has been using the arts to engage in cross-community work in Northern Ireland for over 20 years. Most recently they have established the Street Talk project which brings together the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) with young people from communities around Derry / Londonderry to demystify and familiarize them with one another.

To appreciate the need for a program like Street Talk, one needs to understand the complicated history of the police and the local communities. "Historically in Northern Ireland there were three communities: the Protestants, the Catholics, and the police," says Terry McKenna, a PSNI Inspector who is involved with the Street Talk project. "There are huge legacy issues here. Many people grew up with their grandparents and parents not accepting the police as a legitimate political force. Right through the Troubles, that was the perception, that the police were their own 'side'. So since the cease fire we're now trying to get the police accepted as a normal part of society."

Through Street Talk, teens engage with police officers and other teens from communities that are not their own. The officers don't come in uniform, and often the teens don't initially know who is from a Catholic neighborhood and who is from a Protestant neighborhood. Activities ranging from graffiti to video production to lightbox art have provided creative outlets and opportunities for discussion. It takes time, but soon groups are mingling, eating pizza, and realizing they have a safe and neutral space to ask questions they might have never thought to ask before.

"Street Talk is humanizing the police by stripping back the uniform," explains Terry. "Police officers come in out of uniform and they pick up a guitar, or work on an arts project

with the kids. When the kids are told that this guy is a police officer, they jump back and say, 'he is?' You see their whole perception change and conversations begin."

"We interviewed the police for a movie we made," says Ronan, age 15. "At first I was angry at the police, but as we asked questions I

"It was a Tuesday night and the Currynierin kids couldn't go to their own community center since it was closed. So the Tullyally kids straight away said that they should come to the Tullyally community center. They met them at the edge of the neighborhood and walked the Currynierin kids in. Later, they walked them

back to the interface area to ensure that they got home safe. The next evening they did it again. Normally this would be considered impossible. This is the first time that this has ever happened."

Street Talk has received a Flagship grant from The Ireland Funds to further this arts initiative in the hopes that community relations continue to improve and peace is complemented by reconciliation, one person at a time.

"Our work is pioneering and without The Ireland Funds support we would not be able to deliver this," explains Elaine Forde, Project Coordinator at the Playhouse. "Support from The Ireland Funds is helping us to change the lives of these young people in Northern Ireland."

The goal is to see the sectarianism and perceptions of limited options continue to fade as the project reaches more young people. "We are also breaking the tradition of negative relations that exist between communities," says

Elaine. "Our model is fun and informal, with the aim of deterring young people from crime by giving them the confidence and skills to make better choices."

Georgia, age 16 has a new perspective thanks to Street Talk. "My brothers are in their twenties and they still have an attitude about the police. But my friends don't. We have met actual officers through Street Talk and now we can say, 'Hey, I know him.' I guess because of that, our stories have changed."

started to understand why they do their job. We got to know them. I've realized it's harder to be angry at someone when you know them."

The effect of the project is also being felt at the community level with young people from traditionally sectarian neighborhoods now spending time with one another outside the program.

Gareth, a youth worker, explains how after an activity with Street Talk, the young people from Tullyally, a predominantly Protestant area, reached out to their new friends from Currynierin, a predominantly Catholic area.







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—Terry McKenna, Inspector, City North and City West  
Neighborhoods, Police Service of Northern Ireland



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