

# Camp Camilla

With help from  
The Ireland Funds,  
Camp Camilla builds  
friendships across community  
lines in Northern Ireland

Camilla Ballard has worked for more than 20 years as Director of Youth at First Presbyterian Church of Dallas, Texas. She has researched, organized and led multiple groups of Americans to Northern Ireland volunteering in cross-community work. She was the first recipient of The Ireland Funds Corboy Anam Cara Award, given by The Ireland Funds' Texas chapter, in recognition of her efforts supporting integrated education. Camilla and her husband Bill, are the proud parents of Megara Ward and Sam Ballard, both of whom have volunteered extensively in Northern Ireland.







## *Anam Cara: Soul Friends in Northern Ireland*

BY CAMILLA ELLIS BALLARD

Growing up, my family's heritage was never discussed,

so what a surprise recently when my older sister shared that one of the things our grandfather was known for was his repeated and fervent declaration that he was Irish. It was news to me. Does it explain my almost lifelong passion for peacemaking in Northern Ireland? Who can say?

In 1971, as a teenager growing up in south Arkansas, I came across a newspaper article detailing the ongoing violence in Belfast and surrounding areas.

My reaction was swift and visceral. I was desperate to pack a bag, fly over and help in any way I could. In reality, I knew that wouldn't happen. I couldn't imagine that it ever would. So at 17, I began to pray for peace, thinking that would be my sole contribution toward reconciliation in a country with which I suddenly felt an inexplicable connection.

Decades passed, and in my 40s, as the new Director of Youth at First Presbyterian Church in Dallas, Texas, our senior pastor, Bill Carl, asked, "If you could lead our youth anywhere in the world to make a difference, where would you take them?" I sat bolt upright in my chair and without hesitating blurted out, "Northern Ireland!" He smiled and suggested I explore that notion.

From that conversation in 1996, doors gradually began to open which would give me and a community of others repeated opportunities to support the work of reconciliation. It began in earnest the year I was introduced to Netta Blanchard, who was then Director of The Ireland Funds Texas chapter. To this day, I consider her my Irish faerie godmother. Netta introduced me to Jean Kelly, founder and director of Speedwell, an environmental education program teaching respect for each other and our world to children from all backgrounds in Northern Ireland. We remain *Anam Cara*, or *soul friends*, to this day.



## CAMP CAMILLA

In 2006, our youth group was given the opportunity to volunteer for a week with Jean and her staff in Parkanaur Forest. Deep bonds were formed. Thanks to the vision and hard work of First Presbyterian youth leader, Harold Hall, 2012 saw 75 of us return to Northern Ireland, this time volunteering at Blackwater Integrated College in Downpatrick. Connecting with this school and their outstanding principal, Dr. Olwen Griffith, was again initiated by Netta Blanchard and Brian Small, a member of the Integrated Education Fund in Belfast. In 2015, our youth group returned one more time to try out a model for an American-style sports and arts camp. This was the brainchild of Dr. Griffith and two young Texas women—Jennifer Giles and Jess Skinner. The goal was to encourage friendship and fun among children and youth from all backgrounds in Northern Ireland. They named it Camp Camilla.

Where would we hold the camp? Would any families be interested in what we had to offer? And who could house our group of over 50 youth and adult volunteers? In short, Principal Amanda McNamee and Lagan College, the first integrated school in Northern Ireland, took

a big chance and graciously agreed to host our experiment. A cluster of brave families registered a little over 30 children for camp that first year. And dorms at Stranmillis University College became the perfect housing solution for all those Americans.

The week proved to be a great success. But there were no guarantees going forward. The generosity of First Presbyterian Church could not be expected to continue full funding for such a large international project. And in fact, camp leadership was not expecting them to; but then who? Don't be shocked when I tell you that The Ireland Funds Texas leadership championed our cause and made both the second and third year of camp possible. In 2016, 75 campers enrolled. In 2017—we hosted more than 120 campers. This year we may have as many as 190 campers—with ever-expanding areas, including culinary arts, digital media, and crafts.

In conjunction with the camp in 2017, Charlene Echols, Dallas lawyer and volunteer at the first camp in 2015, created a leadership through service program for a select number of Northern Ireland and American youth. The “Kelly Campers”, named for Speedwell founder Jean Kelly, launched with 14 youth last August. How was this possible? Through the financial generosity of those Ireland Funds folks and a scholarship program honoring Mike Corboy—my Irish faerie godfather! This June, 21 young people from both countries met in Dallas to continue the program.

*I would love to go back to my 17 year-old self and tell her, “You’re Irish. And you have no idea the adventure ahead of you.”*





*The Kelly Campers* were named for pioneering peacemaker and Harry McKillop Irish Spirit Award recipient, Jean Kelly. The Kelly Camper Program launched in 2017 offering opportunities for international fun, friendship and leadership development, with a distinctive American flair. Following up on that week in Belfast at Camp Camilla, 21 youth from Northern Ireland and America met in Dallas to continue the leadership through service experience. Led by staffers from both America and Northern Ireland, the campers volunteered at a variety of projects. The focus for several was young children's literacy (Mi Escuelita), clean water for the world (Paper for Water), and pediatric brain cancer research (Alex's Lemonade Stands). In the evening the group heard from a range of speakers who are making a positive difference in the world. We believe that the sky will be the limit for these young people and the difference they will continue to make in the world.

