

STREET TALK

AT THE DERRY PLAYHOUSE

Helping the next generation break barriers in Derry/Londonderry

The Playhouse in Derry/Londonderry has been using the arts to engage in cross-community work in Northern Ireland for over 20 years. With help from The Ireland Funds, the Street Talk project brings together the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) with young people from segregated communities around Derry/Londonderry to demystify and familiarize them with one another.

USING ARTS-BASED INTERVENTION
BENEFITS HAVE RANGED FROM
DEVELOPING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS
WITH THE POLICE AND YOUNG PEOPLE
FROM OTHER COMMUNITIES TO GAINING
ACCREDITED OPEN COLLEGE NETWORK
QUALIFICATIONS WHICH WILL ENHANCE
FUTURE EDUCATION AND CAREER
OPPORTUNITIES



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'. Since the ceasefire 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.

Today, the Playhouse is not only continuing the now-established Street Talk program with teens, but also working with younger children to combat sectarianism and develop trust.

Connect magazine sat down with Max Beer, Interim CEO of the Playhouse; Elaine Forde, Project Coordinator; Caroline Temple, Coordinator of the Street Talk Project; and Pauline Ross, Founder and Artistic Director of the Playhouse to learn about the challenges facing their community in Northern Ireland today and how the Street Talk project continues to make an impact.



THE PLAYHOUSE BRINGS TOGETHER CHILDREN AND TEENS FROM SEGREGATED COMMUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION FROM THE NUMEROUS CHALLENGES IN THEIR ENVIRONMENT



THE STREET TALK PROGRAM HAS BEEN ACTIVE FOR FIVE YEARS NOW. WHAT DIFFERENCE HAVE YOU SEEN IN THE YOUNG PEOPLE THAT HAVE COME THROUGH THAT PROGRAM?

A (Max) The thing that really solidified our funding for two years and enabled us to really deliver the project was The Ireland Funds' Flagship support. It was a pilot project, and that two years of funding allowed us to prove that what we did works. It engages with the right young people, and it enables them to think about crime, justice and their community in a different way. From that two years of investment, we've now accessed money through the government's Fresh Start Agreement, and that has a strand of money which is for tackling paramilitarism.

We are now working in eight of the areas that are identified through that Agreement as being high-risk. Several of them are in and around the greater Belfast region, and one is here in Derry. So the Street Talk program has snowballed in a very good way.

(Elaine) One of the things that Street Talk does which is probably quite unique for young people, is that we create a safe, non-judgmental space for young people to talk about crime and to talk about their relationship with the police. Very often that relationship is not very good, as you can imagine, but we challenge that subtly and slowly, and we use artists who are role models for those young people. We create a space where a group of young people begin to self-govern. Very often in those group workshops the answers start to bubble to the surface.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE RECENT CHALLENGES YOU ARE FACING AS YOU RUN PROGRAMS FOR TEENS AND CHILDREN AT THE PLAYHOUSE?

A (Elaine): Paramilitary activity has increased here, so that is a very sharp jump back into the past. Last year there was a massive increase in Derry and in Belfast of paramilitary-style shootings, so we made a short film with our teens called "Recruited," which talked about and underscored these kind of issues. It was fictional, but picked up threads of stories that young people had told us.

The children talk about paramilitaries in the street. The lights go out, and it is almost like ghosts at work in their community. So that's very much at the moment something in our community that we're trying to address.

WHAT IS BEHIND THAT INCREASE IN PARAMILITARY ACTIVITY?

A (Elaine) I've had discussions around that with lots of different people. I don't know if Brexit has had indirect impact on that? There is a heightened threat of that kind of hard border coming back into Northern Ireland. That ties into people's relationships and their perception of the police and who governs communities. Very often when we ask young people, 'who do you see as being your police?' Who deals with issues of law and justice?' They would say, 'the paramilitaries.'

DO YOU SEE THIS YOUNGER GENERATION CONTINUING TO GRAPPLE WITH TRUST ISSUES? WITH THE POLICE? WITH PEOPLE FROM COMMUNITIES OTHER THAN THEIR OWN?

A (Caroline) So we may be short on jobs and investments and prospects for the future, but one thing we are never short of is a huge generation of young people. We have one of the biggest and youngest populations of young people in Western Europe. There is always a new generation coming up. The 10 to 12-year-olds here still feel the legacy of the trauma, and the legacy of the violence of the Troubles.

(Elaine) Many of these children look up to the paramilitaries and gangs. They represent power to them. Through the new work that we are doing in Belfast and Derry, we are working with very vulnerable young people to address those issues.

IS THERE AN AWARENESS OF WHAT YOU'RE DOING HERE TRYING TO BREAK THE CYCLE WITH THE NEXT GENERATION? IS THE REACTION OF PARAMILITARIES AND GANGS IN THE COMMUNITY SOMETHING YOU HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT?

A (Pauline) Yes, it's something that we worry about. If we didn't worry about it, our register would not be complete. Yet we think risks are worth taking for peace and for this younger generation coming up.

(Elaine) There's always that threat. Some of the young people here have parents who are active paramilitary, or their brothers and sisters have been involved. We always ensure that we're very honest with the parents or guardians about what we are doing, and there is an opt in/opt out for their young person to be part of the discussions. We ensure that we do everything with transparency, because those issues are very difficult.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE OTHER THINGS THE PLAYHOUSE TALKS ABOUT AND HELPS YOUNG PEOPLE WITH?

A (Pauline) The suicide rate here is getting higher.

(Caroline) More young people have died since the Troubles, from suicide, then actually died during the Troubles. There is a culture, particularly with young men, they don't like to speak about it. It's the social and economic circumstances and the legacy of the conflict. We need to offer hope. Without hope, people die.

(Max) There is less investment in mental health in Northern Ireland than there is in England, Scotland or Wales. And the current lack of government does not help. So it's the community, the voluntary sector that tries to pick up and fill the gaps.

SO COMMUNITY WORK OF THE PLAYHOUSE IS VERY MUCH THIS BEACON HERE? HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE PLAYHOUSE'S MISSION WITH YOUNG PEOPLE NOW?

A (Max) It's about survival at the moment, because our core funding is under threat from our Arts Council. And again, the lack of government does not help that. We are uncovering the unspoken stories from the Troubles, very raw and painful stories that some people have kept locked up. And just unlocking those on stage, using theater to tell the story, to try and provoke empathy and understanding, it's very difficult work.

(Elaine) There is a need and a purpose and I think there always will be. While we see that, we will continue to make it work.

(Pauline) We live in a segregated province: segregated social housing, segregated schools, people don't get the opportunity to meet the other community, and through the Playhouse and through our work across Northern Ireland, people meet.

WE WANT THESE YOUNG PEOPLE TO KNOW WE'VE BEEN THERE TOO AND THAT'S WHY WE'RE HERE NOW TALKING TO YOU. BECAUSE YOUR FUTURE SHOULD BE MUCH BETTER THAN WHAT WE HAD. WE'RE NOT GOING BACK.

SUPPORT FROM THE IRELAND FUNDS FLAGSHIP GRANT ENABLED THE PLAYHOUSE TO ENGAGE WITH 161 YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN INVOLVED WITH CRIME OR WHO ARE AT-RISK

