

Alex

From Fear to Friendship

I was born on the 29th of November 1991 to the sounds of the Christmas number one, Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" Less than four months later Michael Lenaghan, a taxi driver from Belfast was murdered by the UVF.

By the time I was born the worst of the violence and terror associated with the troubles was over, but prejudice and racial hatred were still ingrained in the hearts of many.

The society in which I grew up was one divided by religion and political outlook; Protestant families sent their children to Protestant schools where they could be taught by Protestant teachers and play with Protestant children. This self enforced segregation inhibited the two communities from resolving old disagreements and stopped the next generation gaining their own views on the other community and thus led to many children inheriting the prejudices of their bitter parents.

When looking back on my primary school years, I realize how naive I was. Coming from a family who socialised with people from a variety of backgrounds and upbringings, I was unaware of the conflict that had shaped the lives of my parents or the narrow-minded views that had been passed on to my peers.

I remember walking past; loyalist graffiti, red white and blue bunting and UDA posters on my way to school and being blissfully unaware of the significance behind them. And then being asked in the playground if I was a 'Rice crispy' or a 'Jaffa Cake.' Having not been brought up to question the religion of others I was left unable to answer this question.

But my primary school experiences would have been far removed from those of my Mother, who having a father in the Police would have been unable to socialize

in large groups or invite new friends to the house. Her Childhood years would have been heavily disrupted by the political conflict which raged around her. With Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries fighting for control and superiority over each other, street fighting and terrorist attacks would have happened regularly. Her parents would have lived with the fear that she could have been abducted, for as the child of a police officer she could have been used as a bargaining chip or have been kidnapped as an act of revenge by either side. Because of this she was driven to and from school and wouldn't have been left home alone.

During that period people would have been used to having shopping regularly disrupted. Bomb scares and armed soldiers patrolling the streets of Belfast would have been commonplace. They experienced politics which were heavily influenced by "tit for tat" actions, where each side was unwilling to cooperate with the other, and terrorist groups held more sway than the politicians or the police. Though my mother's social activities were vetted by her parents she lived in a society where there was little or no drug culture and would have been able to go to night clubs without anxiety that her drink could be spiked.

In contrast, in my lifetime, the drug culture in Northern Ireland has boomed, with Date Rape drugs, Ecstasy and Cocaine being found more and more frequently on the night club scene.

In that aspect my social life would be far more restricted than my Mothers, as when going out I would be unable to leave drinks unattended and would have to be wary of drug users and dealers.

Furthermore development in both the media and technology have glamorized violence through video games and films which has led to crazes like happy slapping. And social networking sites like 'bebo' or 'my space' have encouraged internet bullying.

But I'm able to walk freely throughout Belfast, and would frequently go shopping in the Town Centre with friends. I enjoy the opportunity to socialize with whoever I want and frequently do so thought sport and music.

These social interests which would have previously divided communities are now aimed at bringing people together. Through such activities I've built strong friendships with people who hold different outlooks and I've grown up to appreciate the opinions of others even if I don't agree with them. This growing acceptance of difference and a wish for peace and reconciliation is what has led to the political progress which has been made.

In the past sixteen years the government has made groundbreaking developments on the route to peace with both the IRA and the UVF agreeing to ceasefire and decommissioning. An example of the progress made is the steps that both sides of the community working together to devolution which should bring more non sectarian power to the people. Another example of how far politics have progressed is the recent meeting between Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams who, for the first time shook hands as a recognition of forgiveness and a move towards peace. This small step has only been reached after years of political turmoil and must be built upon to ensure peace is reached and maintained. By gaining our own political and social independence we can work together to bring stability back to a country which has had so little.

Today Northern Ireland is a place where bonding is encouraged through cross community workshops and focus groups. Furthermore EMU trips help to unite communities through breaking down old prejudices and forging friendships between school children who probably wouldn't have come into contact with each other. Through these cross-community activities we are preparing the children of today to become more responsible and unbiased as the adults of tomorrow.

Furthermore equal opportunities laws have enabled integration in the workplace, with the new P.S.N.I being composed of fifty percent Catholic and fifty percent Protestant. Furthermore the redevelopment of the police force has enabled a renewed sense of trust from both communities as they feel that previous prejudice has been eradicated.

I attended several EMU trips in my last year of Primary school, each of which was a worthwhile experience which I thoroughly enjoyed. I found that through gaining a greater understanding of a culture other than my own I was able to

understand more about those around me and appreciate their point of view with more ease. I remember that at the start of the trip we only noticed what was different about each other; appearance, names, favorite bands, beliefs but then we came to acknowledge our similarities.

My teenage years have been spent in a community where diversity is cherished. And our multicultural outlook is displayed through our interaction with people from different communities and countries. Through school exchanges I have experienced this first hand. I had a German student staying with us before Summer and she was struck by the friendly nature of the Northern Irish people, she was amazed by how different it was from the photos she had seen of Belfast in the middle of the troubles

In the secondary school which I attend a variety pupils from different backgrounds, who share contrasting outlooks and may not even speak the same first language but are able to work together as Friends. I play music inside and outside of school and have found that this has opened doors to both meeting new friends and visiting new people; The love of music is what has brought us together and we form friendships based on what we have in common and then embrace what differences we have.

As a country Northern Ireland is now renowned for its tourist industry and as the political differences are being resolved many people from other countries wish to emigrate.

For example we have seen a rise in the ethnic diversity of our towns and cities with many Polish, Indian and Romanian citizens choosing to set up communities within our own; many have come for in search of a higher income, better healthcare and schooling systems and have found them here. With towns like Newtonards having the largest Bangladeshi community in the north, and with over three hundred languages spoken throughout our schooling boards it is clear that our culture is continually evolving.

We must continue to develop alongside this to facilitating the integration between both Protestant and Catholic communities and the wider ethnic community, which is a necessary step along the road to political and cultural progression.

This attitude towards development is one which is echoed throughout the whole of Northern Ireland as we approach the dawn of a Northern Ireland where religion and

political preference hold no sway on the friendships we form and our attitude towards others.