

## **Lucy Chambers**

### *Dropping Modern Bombshells*

“You’re from Northern Ireland, wow, aren’t you scared because of all the terrorism?”

This was the opinion of many Americans whom I talked to on a summit for young people during the summer of 2007. My truthful answer was that I am not scared of all the terrorism in Northern Ireland, because it doesn’t exist. Since I was two years old and the IRA ceasefire was called, people could be without the previous fears of terrorism and serious bombings from the ‘Troubles’, especially in Belfast. Now I, and every other person born in 1991, have turned sixteen, the impact of the end of the ‘Troubles’ has been great. Although it may not be recognised by every sixteen-year-old walking in the centre of Belfast with a group of friends, the very fact they are able to do this without the apprehension of an attack shows what the impact of the ceasefire really spells for young people in Northern Ireland today – freedom.

Translink operates a regular bus service into the centre of Belfast from many places in Northern Ireland. The cinemas across the province show the latest releases twelve hours of every day of every week in the year. The shops in Belfast city centre are open seven days a week, late night on Thursdays. Young people today can freely enjoy these amenities, without casting a thought as to whether they will be safe from bombs or how much time they must allow for police checks. Nor will their parents be wracked with worry about their children’s safety or repeat the talk about what to do in the situation of a bomb scare, or how to contact home. Nowadays, young people can simply whip out a mobile phone and have the freedom to roam, knowing one phone call ‘on-the-go’ will reassure parents and settle problems: ‘Mum, the bus is late’, ‘I’ll be home in an hour.’

However, the freedoms young people in Northern Ireland today experience extend beyond their social lives, my chance to attend a summit for young people from many different cultures and countries, which took place in the United States, gave me a chance to further myself as a young person and a young leader, during the summer of 2007. This experience simply epitomises how the freedoms incidentally broaden the lives of young people – through opportunities.

Belfast City Council Youth Forum, the mock EU Council at Stormont, even Northern Ireland Young Life and Times. All these things show that young people today have the opportunity to have their voice heard and be part of the changing face of Northern Ireland. Young people are often given the opportunity to broaden their horizons and meet people from other cultures. Northern Ireland is becoming even more diverse in 2007, as the demographics of the EU change. Every sixteen-year-old experiences this in their everyday lives, even if it is only seeing an Eastern European person serving them in a Belfast café. This alone gives the opportunity for young people in Northern Ireland to have a broader outlook on life and experience many different cultures in their own country. The different cultures even include young people engaging in many cross-community projects closer to home, as these give the opportunity for barriers to be broken and previous stereotypes, especially those formed during the ‘Troubles’, to be challenged. These examples alone show the countless freedoms and opportunities sixteen-year-olds have today to unite and diversify in Northern Ireland.

I am immensely enjoying being sixteen in Northern Ireland, with all the freedoms and opportunities presented to me. I can participate in the Duke of Edinburgh Award, climb the Mourne Mountains, belong to a Girl Guide Unit, help lead a Cub Scout Pack, play my flute along side James Galway, visit numerous art galleries and museums freely, travel across the world from Northern Ireland’s Airports and have tickets to see Kanye West, Christina Aguilera, Snow Patrol or My Chemical Romance live, on my doorstep. I now even have a much wider choice of GCSE subjects and university courses, at a wide variety of academic institutions. Although these opportunities existed during or before the ‘Troubles’, they present themselves even more readily now and young people can take full advantage of them. Being sixteen, I can stand in front of the City Hall and observe

the changing, cosmopolitan country that is Northern Ireland today. I can look upon it with a more mature attitude and outlook on the future than I could, even two years ago.

However, the altering Northern Ireland, and the freedoms and opportunities available for today's young people do not always spell something positive.

The influx of tourists and immigrants to Northern Ireland, now it is a more stable and successful place, pushes the prices up, can young people today afford to stay in Northern Ireland if they want to? House prices in Northern Ireland are rising, we have read this so many times in the local newspapers. However, this presents new fears for young people, it's great if Northern Ireland becomes more cosmopolitan, but this means many of today's sixteen-year-olds will not be able to afford to support a mortgage or even get onto the property ladder in Northern Ireland. We are presented with so many opportunities to further ourselves as young people; nonetheless, Northern Ireland may still lose much of its future if we as sixteen-year-olds cannot afford to stay in our home country.

The problems of paedophiles, media influence and more present new problems for today's sixteen-year-old, they drop theoretical bombshells on our heads, giving us new and more modern fears.

Perhaps for today's parents and young people, one of the most poignant fears is that constantly epitomised by the news headlines regularly; especially recently with the Madeline McCann case, the previous tragedy of Holly and Jessica Wells and the headlines in the Belfast Telegraph reading 'tutor convicted of accessing child pornography'; the fear of paedophiles, attacks and disappearances. In the present day the media constantly bring to our attention the number of people who commit these terrible offences, and although the threat did exist in the time of the 'Troubles' we perhaps pay much more attention to it as it is widely broadcast and always in our minds. We, as sixteen-year-olds in Northern Ireland are required to be much more aware of these problems in today's society and perhaps this takes away a certain amount of the freedom, certainly mentally, which has been granted to us.

Also, another concern in Northern Ireland, especially for sixteen-year-old girls, is the alarmingly high rate of teenage pregnancy. The increasing freedoms resulting from the ceasefire has brought the problem of teenage pregnancy ever closer to home, as

nowadays, since night-clubs and bars are no longer under threat from bomb scares, more and more sixteen-year-olds are going to these places to spend a Saturday night with friends. Young people have long since grown up with the idea that simply staying in and listening to music was enough for entertainment. Education about these issues now starts at an ever younger age, and sixteen-year-olds are much more mature now about these issues than previous generations. I was in the car with my mother and we passed a group of girls, mostly sixteen-year-olds, walking along the road. My mother commented that one of them was evidently pregnant, “and she’s your age too.” This sight is becoming increasingly prevalent in Northern Ireland today, and our society is having to adapt to accommodate it, with better facilities for younger mothers. This could be attributed to the unprivileged backgrounds experienced in Northern Ireland, however, also the media, showing television programmes with a strong sexual content, making sixteen-year-olds more curious about these issues. Despite this, sixteen-year-olds now have to deal with the reality the situation of being young people, learn how to be responsible and deal with adult issues much younger.

Perhaps one of the most prevalent problems for sixteen-year-olds in Northern Ireland is drugs and the knife culture, also caused by the generation of going out to night-clubs at and experiencing situations an increasingly young age. Drugs, although they were prevalent during the ‘Troubles’ were not just as readily distributed or available, and knives were not such a problem amongst sixteen-year-olds, as they are today. However, nowadays, these are increasing worries and are problems that we, as sixteen-year-olds in Northern Ireland must face up to and learn to recognise.

Freedom is a good thing, however, in today’s Northern Ireland it is sometimes felt, due to certain groups of sixteen-year-olds impacting on all others of the same age that freedom should be observed according to the Roman principle ‘everything in moderation.’

Another problem which sixteen-year-olds today in Northern Ireland must tackle, no matter what their social background, is the one of media influence. Size Zero, fad dieting, fashion trends, reality television, Victoria Beckham and other celebrities all influence sixteen-year-olds lives today. You can walk into a newsagent anywhere in Northern Ireland and find more than an ample choice of gossip and fashion magazines to choose from, boasting headlines such as ‘Sneak pictures of Victoria Beckham craftily scoffing a bun backstage at New York Fashion Week’ and ‘Celeb Body Shock!’ Today’s media is sending a message out to the sixteen-year-olds, and it isn’t always a positive one. More sixteen-year-olds are unhappy with their bodies, more want to get plastic surgery and the problems increase. This is one of the modern bombshells, the media influence and how we as sixteen-year-olds can avoid it, and the truth is we cannot. Each and every one of us is influenced by the media portrayal as beautiful being exceedingly thin. One of the sixteen-year-old boys on the summit I attended this summer commented, whilst visiting the Statue of Liberty in New York City, “she would be prettier if she was skinny, she’s much too fat”. This media authority on today’s sixteen-year-olds is getting stronger and it too restricts our freedom, freedom of expression, as no sixteen-year-old wants to be ridiculed in front of their friends for not having the latest look or the latest gossip on their favourite celebrity. As the modern Northern Ireland sixteen-year-old cries out as to how to be accepted by her peers, so the media answer.

Additional problems for today’s young people in Northern Ireland, partially created by the media, is the generation of ‘want’ as supposed to ‘need’. Even before and during the ‘Troubles’ there was a feeling that it was not right to replace something or buy something else until you wore out the original. However, that ethos has changed; nowadays, you don’t have to justify needing it by wearing the original out, you only have to see the hottest celebrity wearing or using it, or simply be told it is better than what you already have, in order to justify buying it. The latest trend this season is patent bags and I observed when school commenced after the summer, that every sixteen-year-old had a patent bag for their school books. Even if the trend had been for every sixteen-year-old to have a 50 litre rucksack instead of a handbag, as long as Victoria Beckham or Paris Hilton sported one, many sixteen-year-olds in Northern Ireland would too. Young people

in Northern Ireland today have the challenge of remaining individual, yet at the same time meeting the requirements of the latest trends and fashions, so they are not mocked by their friends. Having their own personal identity and not being lost in the sea of conformity and uniformity so often found in our society is a huge problem faced by every sixteen-year-old, especially in Northern Ireland, as there is a division and a tug of war between where identities lie. I found a quote, by Quentin Crisp which I feel embodies the teenage need to comply with society, yet be individuals: 'The young always have the same problem - how to rebel and conform at the same time. They have now solved this by defying their parents and copying one another.'

Being sixteen in Northern Ireland, brings a certain responsibility, and perhaps with that modern society requires us to be much more mature and grow up much faster than previous generations. No longer can we dwell in innocence and naivety of our young age, but we must face up to the problems of today, embrace them and always be ready for the modern bombshells in Northern Ireland to be dropped at an ever increasing rate.