

## Reflective Weekend in Longford

June 22, 2015

By Emily Fortner

The farther the bus pulls away from the city, the quicker glimpses of green flash past my window. The mood on the bus is tranquil, with tired yawns breaking out from behind covered mouths. No one is very certain as to what this day will bring, what memories will be made, or what adventures shared. Even though organized sports aren't really my forte, I am excited to spend the day interacting with Irish children and learning more about the Longford community.

When we arrive in Fermoy, County Longford, we are welcomed by Joan Killian Gallagher and her husband, Christopher Clark. Seeing the Killian Homeplace cottages is love at first sight for most of the interns. To me, the cottages look like the picturesque photos advertised in airplane tourist magazines. As we pave a path through the meadow surrounding the cottages, it is easy to see why these cottages are considered a retreat away from the buzzing world around us. A feeling of peace pervades me as I take in the pasture of cows and the rolling meadows of grass spotted with wildflowers. Entering the main cottage, I see that the inside feels just as homey as the outside with dark wooden floors and crisp white curtains covering the windows. We are immediately set to work putting together medals that will be handed out to all the children after the sports events, but it is over sandwiches and soup that we are able to gather around and hear from Ms. Gallagher herself how she came to be the owner of three cottages in rural Ireland.

Ms. Gallagher is originally from New York City, but currently lives in Connecticut where she founded and now runs a successful corporate gift company, Warden-Brooks, Ltd. Although she had wanted to own a small stone cottage for a long time, it was not until she visited some Irish cousins with her daughter, Caroline, in the summer of 1997 that this idea started to become a reality. In 1998, Ms. Gallagher was informed by a cousin that a small cottage and the surrounding land were being auctioned off. Amazingly, this cottage was actually part of the Killian farm in which Ms. Gallagher's great grandfather had lived. Determined to secure this piece of her family history, Ms. Gallagher successfully bid for the land with help from a solicitor. Two years later, she was able to buy the rest of the Killian farm from another cousin and with that purchase, she was finally able to reunite the two halves of the farm on which many of her ancestors were born and raised. The third and final cottage was bought from the estate of Ms. Gallagher's close friend, Rita Shea Connolly, after she passed away.

Having gained a new appreciation of the journey Ms. Gallagher had gone through to unite the cottages and form the Killian Homeplace, the other interns and I rouse ourselves from lunch to make the trek to the local school for the eagerly anticipated Sports Blitz. The excitement in the air is tangible—not only are the interns looking forward to interacting with the local children, but the children are similarly thrilled to have a chance to play with the American students who had traveled via bus and plane to make it to rural Fermoy. The interns lead the children in some preliminary stretches, and the hilarity of the sight is not lost on me as I observe the

children twisting themselves into strange positions with the seriousness of Olympic athletes. We then promptly split up into three large groups that will circulate between basketball, soccer, and American football, of which the interns are in charge of teaching.

There are many points throughout this time in which I step back to observe the organized chaos around me. Everywhere I look, I see joy and enthusiasm and camaraderie. There is playful banter between the children, which then turns into playful banter between them and us interns. The excitement mounts when interns, schoolchildren, and local families unite to partake in a few games of both American and Gaelic football. The rules are jumbled and so are the teams, but the energy of the sports are catching and we all take part with good will. I think this is the most exciting game of any sport I have ever witnessed or taken part in. The pictures from that day are great, but the memories are even better. At the end of the Sports Blitz, the interns join together in the Notre Dame Fight Song, which seems to delight the children, before we begin passing out congratulatory medals and high-fives.

The rest of our day is taken up with dinner, Mass, and a reflection session with Father John-Paul, during which we are given excerpts and quotes on which to reflect and discuss. Father John-Paul speaks to us about carrying our crosses, discerning our vocations, and cultivating a community of love wherever we go. For me, I see the last theme immediately in our experiences earlier that day with the Fermoy community. Interacting with those children created a bond that bridges two countries and two continents. Every single intern was fully invested in making the Sports Blitz a day to remember for the community, and in return, the children were eager to interact with us and learn about our lives in America as Notre Dame students. It was a day of both cultural and social exchange that I believe affected all of us in some way. I personally was grateful for the opportunity to engage with the Irish community on a more personal level than I had been able to before. The casual nature of our interactions granted us a more in depth look at the traditions and experiences that make up the Irish culture than any class or lecture could have done. As Ms. Gallagher expressed to me in a follow up email, "It really is a beautiful fusion of [my family's] heritage to have Notre Dame students staying in Fermoy... I believe so strongly in the benefits of cultural and educational exchange, especially for students. It is life altering in a very positive way. I would like them to experience things that tourists would never be able to experience."

Throughout the rest of our reflective weekend in Longford, the spirit of cultural exchange and learning remained with the interns. We hiked around Barley Harbour, visited the workshop of bog sculptor Michael Casey, ate in a local pub, and learned about peat harvesting from the company Bord na Mona. With these experiences came more knowledge about what life is like for many people across Ireland. I think that in America, many of us are used to a life of constant motion, exams, homework, internships, jobs, families, and friends. However, here in rural Longford, the beauty and peacefulness of the vibrant green countryside showed us how to take a step back and just breathe in the experience. The enthusiasm and welcome expressed by the local community showed us the energy and kindness of the Irish people. In return, I think that the interns were able to show who we are as Americans, but more importantly who we are as Notre Dame students and members of a different kind of Irish community.

I cannot convey anymore how beneficial the Longford trip and reflective weekend was for the other interns and myself. I am thankful that I was able to participate in this weekend and have these experiences due to the generosity of the Longford community and of course Ms. Gallagher, who has informed me that even a month later the Fermoyle children are still talking about the Sports Blitz. I am confident that Notre Dame interns will continue to learn and grow from the Longford weekend trip in the future. In the words of Clare Kossler '17, "I feel that these types of cultural interactions are extremely important—both because they encourage better relations between peoples and cultures, and because they expose people to their shared heritage and emphasize the commonalities of the human condition." I could not agree more.