

Program allows reality break for Irish youths

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

When these people say "I need a vacation," they mean it in ways that the average American worker never could.

For the last 11 summers, children from Belfast, Northern Ireland, have spent six weeks with Rochester-area families through the Irish Children's Program.

Designed for youths ages 10 to 15, this organization enables children to temporarily get away from the often-

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Host parent

violent atmosphere — stemming from centuries-old hostilities between Catholics and Protestants — which looms over their home city of Belfast.

Through a variety of social events, the Irish visitors — usually an even split of Catholics and Protestants — also get the opportunity to do something that many would frown upon back in Belfast: work through their religious differences.

"The primary idea is to get them to associate and become friends with each other, which is something they wouldn't normally do over there; and to keep the friendships going when they return (to Belfast)," said Webster resident John Connell, a Monroe County Court judge who serves on the Irish Children's Program board of directors along with his wife, Kathy.

A committee in Belfast chooses the applicants. Travel expenses are mostly paid for through fundraiser events around Rochester as well as donations by the host families.



Kellie McCann/Photo Intern
St. Lawrence parishioners Jason and Tiffany Scheib (from top) relax with Kevin Johnston (bottom) of Belfast, Ireland, during a June 28 picnic at Ontario Beach Park. The picnic marked the beginning of the Irish Children's Program for 1992. Kevin will stay with the Scheib family for six weeks as part of the program.

This year's contingent, which arrived on June 26, officially began its visit with a picnic at Ontario Beach Park on June 28. Other planned events include trips to Seabreeze Park and a Rochester Red Wings game, roller skating and miniature golfing, and a closing picnic at Durand Eastman Park. The children will return to Belfast Aug. 6.

In addition, the Irish youths will get to enjoy the everyday pleasures of summer vacation — without having the threat of violence looming over their heads.

"They get a sense of freedom. They can walk out in the street and ride bikes to the store," said Irondequoit resident Suzanne O'Neil, a host parent. "Over there you mostly have to stay within your own neighborhood."

The O'Neil family is hosting a "veteran" of the Irish Children's Program: 15-year-old Martin Flynn is spending his fourth summer with the O'Neils. According to Flynn, the highlight of the annual trek to Irondequoit is "playing baseball."

He is also being accompanied for the second time by his 11-year-old brother, Anthony; their mother, Mary, even made the trip last year.

The emotional upheaval of their lives is brought home through Martin Flynn's experiences. A close friend of his recently died during street fighting in Belfast, so returning to his native country is not a particularly joyous experience for Martin.

Departing in early August is an experience that O'Neil describes as "absolutely horrible. Last summer we had to pull my son (Dave, 14) and Marty (Flynn) apart. They were crying so hard."

"It's always a very sad time that produces mixed feelings for these kids," added Connell. "It's not unusual for them to say, 'Can I come back,' or 'Can I stay longer.'"

Mingling with their hosts can often be easier for the Irish children than blending with each other, since Catholics and Protestants live in predominantly segregated areas back in Belfast.

"It's an interesting transformation," noted Connell. "You can tell there's two camps (Catholic and Protestant) when they first get here, but after a few days of get-togethers, that seems

to pass."

This bonding can be close to impossible in Belfast, where police patrol the city streets because of frequent unrest.

"It's disconcerting when an armed platoon of soldiers comes down the street with their guns pointed back at you," remarked Fairport resident Charles McParland, a host parent who visited Belfast about a month ago.

Connell noted that the social outings here are staffed by extra police officers, more for friendly reasons than for security purposes.

"The idea is for the children to see police in a different light," Connell pointed out.

Karen McKeown, 12, is making her first trip to the United States. Raised in a Methodist family, McKeown attended her first-ever Catholic service last weekend when the McParlands brought her to Mass at Fairport's Church of the Assumption.

"It was different, but it was good," she said.

Regarding the religious separation in her homeland, McKeown commented, "I don't think it's right. I think Catholics and Protestants should live together."

YOUTH BRIEFS



Madison High class plans reunion for Sept. 18-19

ROCHESTER — The class of 1942 at Madison High School is planning its 50-year reunion.

An informal luncheon will be held on Friday, Sept. 18, followed by a dinner-dance on Saturday, Sept. 19. Both events will take place at The Party House, 677 Beahan Road, Chili.

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