

Maighread Kennedy's Story

1970 was the year when it all began for Maighread. A summer scheme was arranged in the youth club in Turf Lodge. It was run by international volunteers, students from America and organised by Doug Baker who was working in the Presbyterian Centre at Queen's. Doug was also looking for local volunteers and Maighread who was 17 at the time got involved. The scheme ran for 4 weeks in Turf Lodge and then one week at Corrymeela in Ballycastle. Maighread and her friend were responsible for music and singing. This was her first contact with Corrymeela and also with a wider world. Maighread's father was involved in the Tenants Association in Turf Lodge and he invited some of the student helpers home for meals. Meeting these young people including a black man blew Maighread's minds as she had never left West Belfast before. Likewise, at Corrymeela she was fascinated to by the variety of people she met there. Some invited her for a meal at their place near Queen's. It was the first time she was in this area. Even the food seemed to be different - casseroles and salads. These people took an interest in her, her story and songs. There was a real sharing of cultures which made a deep impression on her.

When the students left at the end of the summer, Doug was keen for young people from different summer schemes to stay in contact and so he set up PACT (Protestants and Catholics Together). It was mostly made up of young people from Turf Lodge and Sandy Row. Margot, Ernie Wilson and Doug were some of the leaders and they asked Maighread to get involved. Some of the young people from Turf Lodge came from the Magee family who later became members of Corrymeela. For such a group to exist transport was crucial and this was provided by the Police Community Relations. Maighread became good friends with a particular policeman, Albert Matchett – a friendship which has lasted to this day. The group ran for two years and had many weekends at Corrymeela.

During the life of PACT Maighread was at St Mary's Training College studying to become a teacher and met Paddy her future husband. Doug went back to the States at that point and the links with Corrymeela stopped for a while though Doug kept in touch with her and always called on her when he was in Belfast. She recalled worship in the Quiet Room of the old house with very self-conscious young people who were not used to this informality. Maighread was struck by the prayers. There were no formal prayers. It was so different from the Mass she was used to. For her at 18, Corrymeela was a place of freedom, away from Belfast. It was also a place to meet young people, especially young men and interesting characters like Billy McAllister. She was now crossing town regularly never having left the Falls area before. She often attended barn dances in the Presbyterian Centre.

Another important experience was Easter Meet in 1973. This was a conference organised by young people for young people and at this particular event they had Garreth Fitzgerald and Connor Cruise O'Brien. Maighread was interested in politics and she also found that people were interested in her and her story of growing up in Turf Lodge. She came from a working class Republican background and so knew about discrimination and being a second class citizen and not getting a good job. It gave her confidence to realise that her story was as important as those of others and that she was listened to. However, this also meant that she no longer felt completely at home in her own Community. She had changed.

Maighread got married in 1974 and a new part of her life started. Corrymeela did not play a big part in her world at this time.

Then she got an invitation to take part in a family week at the Centre. The theme was Roots and Wings and the week was led by Donald and Isobel McDonagh. During this week she met Harold

and Clodagh Good, David and Heather Godfrey and Desney and Roger Cromey. This holiday experience brought her back in touch with Corrymeela.

The family week had brought her back in a more mature involvement in the Corrymeela Community. It became a place of sharing ideas. She got involved in leading worship which was a wonderful experience for her and so different from going to Mass. Corrymeela helped her understand more about her Catholic faith and what she herself believed in. She was also interested to hear the faith story of others. She found so often that they had prayers and music in common. Her growing awareness and confidence encouraged her to do new things, including a course in Ecumenism.

One of the highlights for Maighread were the women's weekends at Corrymeela, organised for women from different Churches both North and South. They were new and exciting. The week she spent at Corrymeela with the summer scheme was also very important as she had never been involved with a youth club before. As a youth she had focussed on school work as she wanted to go to grammar school, so going to a youth club was not part of her experience. Meeting the Youth Club at Corrymeela meant that when she went to Training College, she did a course in youth and community work as part of her training.

Maighread was also involved in Summer Fest with Doug Baker. She helped with the coordination of the sharing groups. This was again an experience they could share as a family. Paddy got involved in the production of the Corrymeela News. As a Corrymeela member she was also involved in a trip to Germany to visit women's centres and represented Corrymeela at a peace conference in Israel.

Like so many Corrymeela members, the weekends with Roel became an important part of her learning. For Maighread, Corrymeela has been about the people she met and the relationships she formed. She became aware how far Corrymeela reached. She met Corrymeela people in education, in politics, in community work. While Maighread is not a member at present however, she is a very active Associate and enjoys participating in open events such as the Thomas Merton Weekends. Her involvement in the local cell group, regular meetings with some members, and singing with Voices Together also help her keep connected. She was on Corrymeela Council and felt it was an important time for her and she had something to offer that fed into decision making.

Corrymeela has always been a thread through Maighread's life. It has been influential in the work she does for Barnardo's in parenting work. Her contact with Desney and her Tree Tops project lead to an interest in counselling which she now does in primary schools. In her parenting work she got the opportunity to do some training with prison officers. Again, this was a completely new and challenging experience for Maighread with her background of growing up in West Belfast. She stresses the importance of relationships and meeting people face to face; to look into people's eyes. For her Corrymeela has always meant that she feels accepted for who she is. She knows the importance of this when meeting others. Corrymeela provided her with opportunities to expand her horizons, to be herself and to grow in confidence. She in turn tries to do this for others she meets.