

First Rotary Report

By Korah Winn

Introduction

As the time has come for me to assess the beginning part of my ambassadorial scholarship, I find I have so much to be grateful for that it is hard to put it all into words. When I first got here I kept noticing all the similarities between Northern Ireland and the U.S.A., but the longer I am here, I am able to see the differences and appreciate them. I notice how the educational system here places a lot of emphasis on personal responsibility for learning. I notice how much the United States flies their flag. I see the character and age of little N.I. towns. I take note of the flexibility of time over here. There are small things about this area that just start adding up until you finally begin piecing them together and come up with revelations that you had not contemplated before. Much of this has only come to me by having the opportunity to live here. A two-week vacation could not have possibly taught me everything I have come to see. So with that said, I will do my best to share some of these experiences with you in the coming paragraphs.

1. My Study Program (Adaptation and Progress with my Studies)

I am thoroughly enjoying my TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) modules. The classes are very insightful. My professor, Dr. Steve Walsh, does an excellent job incorporating distinct examples into his lectures to illustrate key points. There are copious amounts of reading which helps to increase my subject area knowledge. My assigned papers are helping me become a master in the areas of phonetics and speaking. My only sadness comes from the fact that Dr. Walsh has announced his resignation after ten years at Queens. This came as quite a shock to those of us in his program. There are fears that our second semester will not be as high quality as the first one was, given that it will take a while for the situation to sort itself out. Other than that point, there is virtually nothing I can find fault with in my studies.

2. Preparation for Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship Duties

My preparation time was quite stringent before coming to Northern Ireland. Although I found myself biting my nails at time, I could not help but be relieved when I arrived in Belfast with no unfinished business. My Rotary PowerPoint presentation went through a rigorous examination period before I came. I was able to test it on four different groups before even making a single official presentation in Northern Ireland. I found that other scholars in district 1160 did not have to go through the same process. I wondered how they fared. My training made my transition here easier. The clubs I have spoken at have loved my presentation and they all remarked on the enthusiasm I show during it.

3. My Rotary Participation Since Arrival

From the moment I arrived, my lovely host counselor took me under her wing. I have attended host club meeting and functions. I went to the district conference and got to meet tons of people. During that time the Navan and Cork Rotary clubs hosted me for lunch on different days. I have visited the homes of Newtownabbey Rotary members. I participated in Jr. Achievement with my host counselor. I have given my presentation to the Antrim and Enniskillen clubs and have four other presentations lined up. I have contacted over twelve other clubs concerning possibly speaking at their meetings. I will also soon be attending Rotary Christmas functions, as we get closer to Dec. 25th.

4. My First Impressions of Northern Ireland

I have to admit that I had a lot of misconceptions about N.I. when I first got here. The "troubles" were on people's minds for so long that it really affected what the media portrayed about this area. I have been amazed to see such a thriving region that is experiencing quite a bit of growth. One of my biggest eye openers though was when I saw the differences between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Until that point I had kind of subconsciously wanted to clump the whole island together. I visited Dublin a couple weeks ago. I was only in the Republic of Ireland for less than twenty-four hours but in that short period of time, my visit allowed me to see Northern Ireland in a different light.

What threw me off was the whole “Irishness” of the Republic. You could actually call people there Irish without offending anyone. Of course you’d call them Irish. What else would you? It’s not necessarily the same when you live in another part of the island that just happens to be a part of another country called the United Kingdom. In Northern Ireland you don’t see as many flags. Flags have connotations that go along with them that have the potential to cause people to fight and hate here. I can only begin to wonder if it is identity that causes all of this walking on egg shells.

Some people consider themselves Nationalists while others think of themselves as Unionists. The stereotypes are that the Nationalists are Catholics and that their extremists are called Republicans whereas the Unionists are Protestants and their extremists are Loyalists. Life is not cut and dried like that so those stereotypes do not apply through and through. What happens though is when one group tries to negate the identity of the other and say that their own identity is right or better, it causes a huge rush of anger because one group is denying the other’s identity. When the Union Jack or the Republic’s flag is flown there are so many strong connotations that go along with either and someone’s feelings are bound to be offended. It feels odd to come from a country that identifies so strongly with its flag and then move to a land where flags are almost considered contentious.

If I slip and call someone from here Irish, I am excused as a foreigner, but someone from here has to know the layers upon layers of nuances that come with being from Northern Ireland. If they call themselves British and loyal to the crown, one part of population hates them, but if they call themselves only Irish and desire that the north be united with the Republic of Ireland then they can be perceived as disloyal to the United Kingdom. If they want to march to show their roots or beliefs, someone, somewhere is bound to be offended. So much hurt doesn’t go away quickly but they are doing their best to strain towards a future where no matter how people identify themselves, they won’t have that identity negated. It’s a difficult task but peace is still gracing Northern Ireland for the moment. It’s many people’s wish and prayer that she stay permanently and help people be exactly who they are without anyone arguing that they have to change.

Once I began to learn more about the complex identity of the people in my community, it helped me to understand them better. When I talk to my friend Ray, who is Catholic, he tells me stories about how he cannot go to certain areas of Belfast because he is afraid. He says there are times he is walking down the street and he sees a certain group of people and he stops talking because he does not want them to hear his accent because they might begin to harass him. My friend Fionnuala has told me stories about growing up here and her experiences have been quite different than those of Ray. I just keep taking time to listen and absorb what my friends and acquaintances are telling me about this part of the world. It has been fascinating so far and I have picked up so much. My friend Kathryn is from Belfast and she was living in the U.S.A. during September 11, 2001. She remembers people asking her why she was not crying like the rest of them after she heard the news. She told them that she had grown up with riots, bombs and acts of terrorism. The world did not stop turning because bad things happened. She actually hoped that America would have more of an idea what other areas have gone through since they had experienced terrorism first hand. It was not that she wished ill will on the states, it was that she hoped their perspective changed so that they would have more compassion for what was going on in the world.

I have been fortunate enough to get to speak to several different school classes about what life in America is like. It was often humorous to see what stereotypes the children had in general. I got asked twice if I had ever seen Elvis Presley’s house with my own eyes. “Is the play station 3 out yet?” “Do the kids really not have to wear uniforms to school?” “Have you seen any movie stars?” I loved being able to share stories with them and give them a better understanding of a place many of them had only learned about through television.

During my time here I am tying my best to make new friends and visit different places. I want to do my best to balance Rotary, my education and my new experiences. It is a juggling act at times but there is no other place I would rather be at this moment. I am so grateful to have this opportunity and I am doing my best to make the most of it. I want to share what I am learning with others so that I can hopefully foster better understanding and goodwill among the people I come in contact with no matter where they come from in this world.

5. Link to all my photographs of my time here.
<http://picasaweb.google.com/ms.winn>