



Program bridges gap between two religions

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HAMPTON — In Northern Ireland, schools are segregated by religion. Hostility between Catholics and Protestants has been passed down for generations — dividing cities, towns and students.

But last week, five Catholic teen-agers joined five Protestant teen-agers, and they left Northern Ireland together to come to the United States.

Through a program called Friends Forever, the 10 students have set up camp in a house on Hampton Beach — five girls in one bedroom, five boys in another. They all share a bathroom, and for two weeks they will share everything.

"It's building bridges between two communities," said Mandy Kerr, one Friends Forever group leader. "In Northern Ireland we have Catholics and we have Protestants and a majority do mix quite well. But there are Catholic schools and Protestant schools and Catholic activities and Protestant activities. We help bring them together to show them that they are similar — they just go to different churches, and that shouldn't be an issue at the end of the day."

Friends Forever is a nonprofit organization and was founded in 1986 as a joint project of the YMCA of Portsmouth and the YMCA of Carrickfergus, Northern Ireland. The program was designed to erode fear and mistrust between cultures in conflict.

Many of the organization's resources are donated by Rotary clubs, restaurants and local families.

This fall, four groups of 10 students each are visiting the United States from Northern Ireland. Two groups are staying in Maine, and another is in Orlando, Fla. The program will host two more groups from Northern Ireland in the spring and a group of Arab and Jewish teens from Israel in the summer.

This fall's New Hampshire group is made up of 14- and 15-year-olds from a town called Ballymena.

On Tuesday, the group was at Hampton Airfield, where local Rotarians were giving them scenic rides in small planes. Eight students waited on the ground as two of their peers circled above them. Some wrestled in the grass and others sat along the porch railing of The Airfield restaurant.

They talked about flying over St. Thomas High School in Dover, where they had gone the day before to visit students. They talked about how they had cleared up some stereotypes.

"They wanted to know if I was a leprechaun," said Marcus McCreight, 14.

But in a more serious tone, Sarah McKendry, 15, said, "(The program) proves to people that we are not all bombing people."

And Nikki McKeown, 15, sitting beside McKendry on the railing, said, "It's to show that we can be civilized as Protestants and Catholics."

But they all agreed there are things about living in Northern Ireland that are difficult.

"You've got to be careful in ways you don't have to here," McKendry said.

"Places where you go, and wearing certain things that portray your religion — you have to be careful," added Sarah Speers, 15.

But Kathryn Boyd, 15, said there are misconceptions about the violence in Northern Ireland.

"It's not as violent as they show on TV," she said. "They only show the bad stuff, not the everyday stuff. Only a few of us fight; the rest of us are peace-loving."

Boyd and three of her Friends Forever companions have created a band since they arrived in New Hampshire. They call themselves The Celtic Knot — two flutes, a violin and a guitar.

Timothy Connor, 15, brought his violin and some sheet music. One afternoon they just started playing.

"It was beautiful music and it was really nice to see Catholics and Protestants playing together and making such beautiful music from two warring cultures," said Elicia Carmichael, executive director of Friends Forever.

Carmichael said the students are surprised to see the religious diversity in New Hampshire schools.

"They'll go to the Catholic high schools and there are Jewish kids there, but in Northern Ireland you can tell a kid's religion by the color of his uniform," she said. "They are shocked that some people here don't even know what religions their friends are."

The group is planning visits to a Catholic and a Protestant church, and they've discussed each other's religions. But they don't dwell on the subject.

"We don't talk an awful lot about religion," said Kerr, a group leader, "because we are trying to tell them that it's not important. We want to tell them, 'Go have fun, have a good time, and get to know each other.' "

Once they get back to Ballymena, the students will meet several times over the next year — through the program — to talk about the experience. And they said they also plan to get together on their own.