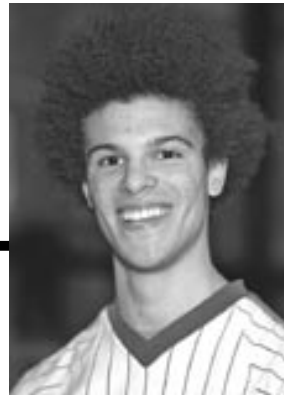


The Nerve Centre, Derry, Northern Ireland

A Nerve Centre in Northern Ireland: Can Music Bring Down the Walls of Derry?



Patrick Raymond '05

Derry

My boss at the Nerve Centre this summer, John Peto, told me upon my arrival in Derry from New York that “many people consider Derry the biggest village in Northern Ireland.” Though Derry is the second largest city in Northern Ireland with a population of 70,000, one almost always has their lives intertwined with someone they see in the local shops, on the street or in the local pubs. Derry very much has an atmosphere of a modern version of a small Irish village. When I landed in Derry, John greeted me at the airport, which was not much of an airport by American standards. Derry’s airport had only one landing strip and one take off strip. There are only about seven flights both arriving and departing from Derry airport everyday. Not many people visit Derry, and not many people leave.

When John picked me up from the airport we immediately drove to the Nerve Centre so that he could give me an early tour of both my place of employment for the summer and Derry in general. As we drove from the airport towards the Nerve Centre, I noticed the stereotypical Irish scenery: grey skies, rolling green hills, old men with wool hats riding bicycles, and sheep resting along the road. Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland both seem to be covered with a green backdrop that always reminds you that you are on the Emerald Isle. The ride in John’s Volkswagen from the airport took me through the outskirts of Derry on narrow two-lane highways until we reached the fortified center city.

Derry was built with the intention of segregating Catholics from Protestants. The city’s most notable landmarks are the city walls. Derry’s city walls stand 20 feet tall. They were built in 1619 with the support of the British government to help protect the local Protestants from the majority Catholic population and the attack of King James. Though these walls were built nearly four centuries ago, the spirit of segregation and religious isolation that these walls originally represented is

still prevalent in Derry today. Within the wall’s brick borders lies the city center, the economic epicenter of Derry. The city center contains two malls, several small boutiques, restaurants, small businesses, a police station and the city’s only 4 star hotel.

Derry’s walls don’t hold the same significance today that they once had. During the Seize of Derry in the 17th century, the Catholic King James of England had sent troops to attack the city walls that protected thousands of Protestant and Presbyterians from his rule. The walls stand today as a testament of time and honor for many within the city, both Catholic, Protestant and tourists.

Walking around the circular 1.2 mile wall you see many similar sites: churches—both Catholic and Protestant—small houses, and local businesses. Though the sites may look the same, the attitudes and people change with nearly every step you take along the wall. You could walk 10 feet and change from a Catholic neighborhood to a Protestant one, and the only way you would be able to tell the difference is by the flags being flown, the murals on houses, or the colors on the curbs. The city’s walls give one the opportunity to gaze at Derry from all directions.

The walls across the street from the Nerve Center, which I ate lunch on nearly every day, looked onto the Bogside. The Bogside has been the most notorious and violent neighborhood of Derry for the past century, mainly because it is home to a disproportionate number of working-class and poor Catholics. From the walls looking onto the Bogside, one can see a Catholic church that stands tall above the thousands of small-connected houses that look like low-level housing projects of the southern United States. On many of these miniscule houses are murals depicting the historical events of this ghetto. The most striking and vivid mural is of a young man, with his face covered by a bandana, hurling a petrol bomb towards

incoming Royal Ulster Constabulary (R.U.C.) officers during the Battle of the Bogside. The Battle of the Bogside was one of Derry's most violent and fierce battles of the 20th century. The conflict placed Bogside residents against the Royal Ulster Constabulary, Northern Ireland's infamously anti-Catholic police force. The Bogside residents were fighting for control of their neighborhoods from the R.U.C., which signified English rule. The intense battle lasted for three days and nights, leaving the R.U.C. completely outnumbered and exhausted. The situation forced the British army to take control of the situation, promising no further violence or English forces in the neighborhood.

During the Battle of the Bogside, petrol bombs and rock were the main forms of resistance residents used against the R.U.C. The mural appeals to many in the area because a large portion of the residents participated in defending their neighborhood. This celebration of guerilla warfare helps to remind Bogside residents of the struggle for segregation and the need for self-determination among Catholics in Northern Ireland.

I found the "petrol-bomber" to be an extremely strong image because I felt as if that mural was what this area wanted to be represented by. The strongest and most apparent image from Derry's walls looking onto the Bogside was this picture of a young man trying to kill or injure another in the defense of his home. This symbolism was something that followed me throughout my work in Derry. A clear and concrete representation of who you are and what you believed in was something that I knew I needed to establish during my time here because I knew people here took themselves, their history, their opinions, and their identities very seriously.

On the other side of the wall, one looks across the Foyle River, which separates the two sides of the city. The waterside is mainly Protestant, and the cityside is mainly Catholic. There isn't much of a difference in landscape or sights. Both are marked by stereotypical images of "urban" Ireland, with steep hills, small houses, narrow streets, and old men riding their bicycles. From the top of the wall looking onto the waterside, you see cannons aiming towards the Foyle River to ward off King James. From this same position at night, you can see hordes of people crowded into the city center and the peripheral area to make their nightly venture into the pubs.

The Nerve Centre

Walking up the hills of Magazine Street, I am surrounded by the city's walls on my right and small businesses on my left. The Nerve Centre is about half way up the hill. It is comprised of two buildings, one of which is a converted hostel. The buildings are home to a café, a concert venue, rehearsal space for local bands, offices, computer clusters, recording studios and a movie theatre. All of these spaces are used to promote creative learning for those within Derry and Northern Ireland. The main building of the Center is home to Café Nervosa, the movie theatre, and a music venue. The lobby seems to be a meeting spot for Derry youths, as well as a place where one can learn what is going on that month in the Centre, and in other arts related events within Derry and Northern Ireland. During my first day at the Centre, John paraded me around the offices and buildings introducing me to nearly everyone who worked in the Nerve Centre and giving me a brief description of their jobs and a few extra tidbits about that person.

After the tour was over, John took me back to our office, the converted hostel, which looks as if it has been abandoned for many years. Our office was across from the two computer clusters that are used to teach computer classes to Derry youths and those searching for technical training. When John and I finally returned to our office, I was overwhelmed by the vast number of different jobs and amount of work done at the Centre. I had just been introduced to music producers, teachers, musicians, cartoonists, project managers, DJs and many people of various other occupations. With this confusion and curiosity, I asked John, "What do you guys do at the Nerve Centre?" John responded by stating, "We do everything." From my first day at work I really felt as if the Nerve Centre truly did everything. They had their grasp on so many different aspects of the culture and life in Derry that I was confused as to how the Centre's work related to the field of coexistence. John continued his description of the with detail and conviction in the work done there. "The Nerve Centre is all about creative learning, and

Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland both seem to be covered with a green backdrop that always reminds you that you are on the Emerald Isle.

giving local youths and the local community the opportunity to express themselves in many various artistic forms. People in Derry are so sick of coexistence and programs that promote the same boring ideas that these kids have been through their entire lives. The Centre gives them the opportunity for them to do what they want with virtually no intrusion in dealing with creative and innovative forms of expression. Coexistence in Northern Ireland has become so taboo because of the conflict here that our job is to try and create an environment in which the community has the opportunity to express themselves.” John said one of the most important things about the Centre is that it is 100% inclusive, and that no matter what religion, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, or handicap, it is one of the few places in all of Derry that fosters an environment that is open to all members of society.

Though John gave a brief description of the work done at the Centre, I still didn't really understand what they did until I began going to work everyday and being more involved. But, at this point I did understand that their mission was to promote creative learning and creativity to all members of Derry regardless of religion or race, the great dividers of Irish society. The Nerve Centre went beyond embracing just religious diversity—walking around the Centre, I was introduced to the only people of color I had seen in Northern Ireland up to that point.

And it wasn't just that there were other people of a similar complexion to me that made me feel as if the Centre practiced what they preached. My boss, John Peto, was an Englishman. I wasn't expecting my boss to be an Englishman; I had figured that since I was in a Catholic-majority city, the Catholics would be the only people who would really be concerned with the issues of coexistence and equity because it was in their best interest to create change in that society. Having John as my boss immediately broke down my preconceptions about the English and the Protestants in Northern Ireland. His good nature and humor allowed me to further probe him about the reasons why he decided to come to Northern Ireland. He said that he grew up in a working-class/middle-class neighborhood in a small town in Northern England and said that in his youth the only thing he knew about Derry and Northern Ireland was the conflict. “Growing up in England, I didn't really have any concern over Northern Ireland because I didn't feel as if what happened there affected me.” His interest in Northern Ireland and Derry came during his studies in England where he concentrated in sociology and Irish history. It was through his studies and with a scholarship to a master's program in Peace and Conflict Studies at the University Ulster Magee in Derry that he became immersed in the conflict and how it affects both English and Irish society. This interest led him to the Centre. John enjoyed the laid-back atmosphere that seems to be omnipresent in Derry and after studying and living there for a few years, he received a job from the Centre. He now holds the title of project manager at the Centre, but his duties include much more. He drives to Dublin or Belfast at least once a month to try to acquire donations and contributions from government and private organizations in order to fund many of the projects at the Centre. In between

monthly trips to Ireland's major cities, John is either filming a documentary for himself or the Centre, running presentations on various social issues in Northern Irish society, or just singing and doing paper work in his office. John is like the utility player on a baseball team: he does everything you need. And it's not just John; many people at the Centre perform duties that go beyond their job description. The various tasks, events, presentations, film series, and electronic music festivals are done with a vast amount of teamwork. Everyone seems to pitch in with their expertise or whatever help they can provide.

In the Nerve Centre, people work at their own pace. Workers in the office tend to come into work as they please, and deadlines are not as stressed here as in America. The radio was always on in our office, and it seemed as if a conversation was always taking place. This relaxed environment gave me the opportunity to learn more about my co-workers while getting work accomplished at the same time.

John seemed to enjoy living in Derry, but he always commented negatively when we drove through neighborhoods that he considered “to have identity issues.” These were neighborhoods that were exceedingly nationalist or unionist. These neighborhoods are littered with either the union jack and its colors or the Irish tricolor. In Northern Ireland, 90% of all neighborhoods have a demographic that is 90% either Protestant or Catholic. The divide in these communities is tremendous; to this day, the vast majority of grade school and high school students go to segregated schools. These aspects of life in Derry always seemed to aggravate John. The areas he deemed “to have identity issues” he felt consisted of people who cared more about disliking the opposing group rather than holding to their traditions and loving their own culture. He would continue by saying how “sick people around here are,” people care so much about upholding their identity that they neglect the segregation that this pride causes. The best opportunity most people in Derry have to develop relationships with someone of another religion is in integrated schools, at a blue-collar job, or in the service industry. Segregation in Northern Ireland is real, and the division between both groups runs deep. The histories of segregation and hatred towards one another have left this country in a situation where isolation is accepted and often looked at in a positive light.

John continued telling me of some more negative aspects of Derry, and he warned me of the possible racism that I would encounter in my time here. He told me that, “most people aren't racist, they just have never seen or met a black person in their life.” I found his honesty refreshing because I did notice many people blatantly staring at me during my first few weeks in Derry. When I arrived in Dublin, the only racial minorities I saw worked wage jobs and often faced verbal and physical discrimination. Derry residents seem to be completely fascinated by people with a natural tan because the minority population is so miniscule. John told me that when his cousin, who is half Jamaican and half English, visited him in Derry during one summer, he noticed people staring and making rude comments about her hair and skin color. His candor allowed me to better

understand my surroundings and assured me that people really were staring at me while walking down the street. There are so few non-whites in Derry that to see a person of color on the street is something that would stand out in one's day. Though I was conscious of my ethnicity the entire time I was in Derry, I was never victim to blatant verbal or physical harassment. However, many people of color in Northern Ireland face such harsh treatment every day.

Fieldtrip

After getting accustomed to the laid-back atmosphere, the sharp accent, and cars driving on the opposite side of the street, I ventured out with Gary and Nile, a cartoonist and a music/digital producer from the Centre, to a Protestant elementary school 15 minutes outside of Derry city. Before this fieldtrip, the work I had done in the Centre focused on getting me more acquainted with the conflict and culture of Northern Ireland. We arrived at this segregated Protestant school at around 10 a.m. The school was a one level structure that had a large football pitch adjacent to the school, where we were greeted by students kicking a football around while wearing their green and black school uniforms.

The reason for the trip was to finish up an animation which these kids created, directed, drew and for which they produced the music. This was the first time I really saw and understood what the Centre was all about. It is a place that really promotes creative learning for all children in Northern Ireland; it's the kids who come up with the concepts of the story they want to tell and how they want to tell it. This is what I like most about the work done there, it places a great deal of responsibility on the kids to let their creativity shine, instead of having a bunch of artists telling kids what they should draw and how they should draw it. The animations done by school children in Northern Ireland are mainly sponsored by Peace and Reconciliation grants which the European Union has given to Northern Ireland. The sponsorship of these programs by government officials throughout Europe gives many children the opportunity to express their identity and create their own stories.

At the Protestant elementary school, the guys told me that we had to record the music for an animation, which these students had produced. At first I was shocked because these kids were no more than seven or eight years old, yet they wrote, animated and even produced the music of their very own cartoon. What surprised me even more was that the cartoon had nothing to do with the conflict of Northern Ireland. The animation was done to support the creative learning of these kids. These kids were able to use their imagination in any way they wanted with virtually no intrusion by those from the Centre. In the States, many people would find this money wasteful because it didn't really have a purpose in the school's curriculum. But in Northern Ireland, teachers, students and parents find these sorts of activities to be a positive investment into the community.

I was received extremely warmly by the students, partly because I was a foreigner. I had thought that these kids wouldn't be very accepting of me because of my Nationalist name, Patrick, but in reality the reception I got was phenomenal. The kids wouldn't stay quiet, they kept asking me who I thought would win Euro 2004 or if I'd come back more often. I guess I held more preconceived notions about these kids than they had of me. I am glad that this happened because it showed me that not everyone living in Northern Ireland thought of the other side as their enemy. The warm embrace I got from these schoolchildren opened me up to the idea that the majority of people on both sides don't hate one another and would rather live in a peaceful manner.

After this somewhat inspiring turn of events and once the music for the animation was recorded, Gary, the animator, and I ventured off to an integrated school. Integrated schools are a fairly new concept in Northern Ireland, with this school in existence for only 10 years. Integrated schools means that both Catholics and Protestants attend the school, but at the same time I noticed many more racial minority students as well. Here our job was to engage an arts class to begin thinking of an animation they would like to create that is associated with the school's 10-year anniversary. The students in the class were around 15 or 16 years old and were all extremely talented animators. They all wanted to do something humorous to insult teachers, Protestants, and Catholics, showing how ignorant all sides were during the conflict and in the present. In brainstorming for ideas, the students began to tell me why they chose to come to an integrated school. They all had similar answers, that in order for society to progress they felt that these sorts of institutions were necessary to help break down stereotypes and to really begin to coexist. They were all very glad to go to integrated schools because they feel as if now they have more friends than those who go to segregated schools and this was something that they were very proud of. The knowledge of these kids was incredible; they all knew and felt that they were part of history and progress, but at the same time they felt as if integrated schools were the right thing to do. The optimism expressed by these skater punk teenagers was impressive. Their vision of an integrated society was something which they hoped they would see in their lifetime, but in reality felt would never come to fruition.

The Arts and Coexistence

On the cab ride back from the integrated school, Gary and I began talking about why he works as an animator with the Centre. Gary, a Catholic, said "I like working with kids because they are much more honest than adults. The candor of kids I feel allows the issues of peace and integration to be expressed without any fear of being politically correct in order to appease someone. I like working on animation projects because we give people the opportunity to use their creative juices in order to express themselves however they choose to do so. Next week I'll be traveling to Ramallah, Palestine for a few weeks to aid in animation projects with young Palestinian artists. The arts,

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even in areas of conflict, provide people with a creative outlet in which they are able to express themselves and their ideas instead of taking up arms. And sometimes when art reaches its greatest potential, it is able to act as a form of resistance without resorting to violence.” Gary’s initiative in promoting the arts as

a form of resistance and a way to prevent further violence in areas of conflict demonstrated the strength of many people’s conviction in the arts. He discussed the arts as a tool of healing and expression that has a power that often exceeds that of political bureaucracies. His belief in the arts led him to one of the most dangerous areas in the entire world, Palestine, where the loss of human life is often overlooked by the West. Gary’s departure to Palestine provided me with further hope in the arts and in coexistence. I had finally been witness to and friends with someone who continually risked his life by traveling to extremely dangerous parts of the globe to teach animation and encourage artistic expression within many of the world’s most oppressed and subordinated people.

The arts provide a space for people to examine and question the society that one lives in. In Derry, the Nerve Center is a physical space that promotes the use of the arts in both the Protestant and Catholic communities. The Centre is a mediator in the artistic expression of Derry.

Artists can serve as mediators. In divided communities where violence has impaired people’s capacities to listen, artists can use the qualities of receptivity to facilitate expression, healing, and reciprocal understanding. The qualities of listening associated with aesthetic attention—alert but calm, emotional but cognitively aware, engaged but detached—are precisely the kinds of presence that can help people put their experiences into words. Also, artists’ listening to those who have been traumatized by violence can begin to restore a victim’s capacity and willingness to hear the stories and experiences of the other (Cohen 272).

The Centre acts as a mediator similar to that of an artist because it is an institution that encourages creativity and healing through the arts by its initiative of creative learning to integrate Derry’s community

After spending several days traveling to schools throughout Derry County, aiding students in the production of their animations, I returned back to the Center to continue learning more about the history and conflict in Northern Ireland, particularly in Derry. The history of segregation in Derry is something that has come to shape and define the city’s identity. From the 17th century, when Protestants locked themselves within the city’s walls to protect themselves from the Catholic King James, to the great segregation in Derry’s communities today, namely the Bogside and Fountain, segregation has always been and continues to be a prevalent part of the social fabric.

In all of Derry, religious and ethnic segregation are the way of life, and many people view living in hegemony as the only way to live peacefully. Nearly every area of Derry is marked to indicate which religious group has the stronghold of the area. In Catholic sections you would see graffiti saying, “FUCK THE QUEEN” or “Brits Out,” or you would see curbs painted with the orange, white and green of the Irish flag. In Protestant areas, one would find Union Jacks waving off of flagpoles and graffiti celebrating the history of Protestants in Northern Ireland. It seemed as if Derry was almost completely closed off to the ideas of integration. The only place it seemed that people of different religions and ethnicities interact and work with one another, outside of integrated schools and wage labor jobs, was in the Centre.

Back at the Centre I became very interested in the issues and ideas around segregation in Derry. I wanted a perspective outside that of local Derry people to understand the conflict and segregation. I felt as if I was hearing the same story from both sides. Members of both communities would tell me that “we can’t trust these people; they have historically participated in terrorism against my people and my family.” The heat and intensity of those I spoke to on the issue of segregation within Derry reminded me of the fear many whites had of integration in schools and other public facilities in the 1950s and 1960s within the US. This parallel interested me in gaining the perspective of someone who is non-white and lives in this culture and society. So once again I was drawn back to the Nerve Centre, the home of integration within Derry. I found a black Englishman named Kwame, one of the local DJ’s and musical technicians who works at the Nerve Centre. Kwame and I had a strong relationship because we were the only two black guys who worked in the Centre and at times it felt as if we were the only two black people in all of Derry.

Kwame was around 6’2” with thin long dreadlocks. He was known as the best DJ in town and also as one of the most popular people in town. He was in his late twenties and a self-proclaimed nomad. He wasn’t really sure why I had asked him to meet over a pint of Guinness. My intentions were to ask him a few questions about Northern Ireland. We met at Sandinos, my home away from home, where we sat alongside “Free Palestine” flags and murals of Ché Guevara in the poorly lit upstairs corner of the bar. He ordered and paid for both of our pints and as he approached our table with the beers he said to me with a warm smile, “what’s the crack, brother?,” in a strong English accent. I simply asked him, “why are you here?” He responded by stating, “I am here because I love music. I think that music is a tool in healing people and if I could help spread healing and love in this area of the world I feel as if it’s a good thing.” I was surprised by his answer because I thought he would have a much deeper and meaningful response, but like my question he kept it simple. He continued by discussing why he chose Northern Ireland. “I’ve been spinning records since I was a wee lad, and Derry has been so warm to me my entire time here. I’ve witnessed the troubles in the ’90s and I have seen the impact music can make on people. Though people live very segregated, music is one of those few

platforms in which people from all communities come together in a casual manner and just have a good time. Music is the only way integration takes shape here, it's at the Centre or here in Sandinos where people come get drunk and dance to music without taking into consideration religion, race or ethnicity. That's why I'm here, I'm trying to better off society by a little." His words struck a chord with me. Though he wasn't doing the most intellectual work, he was providing a vital service to the community by facilitating events that cater towards integration in an otherwise segregated society. At first, it seemed to me as if his work was just a superficial attempt towards bringing people together without much intellectual justification to support his claims. Though music has the ability to bring rival factions into the same building for a few hours, it doesn't solve any of the political or social ills of the community. The conversation that I had with Kwame made me question his intentions and motivations for working in Derry. Though his mind and heart were in the right place, I wasn't convinced in the power of music. As a hard-headed individual, I don't fully believe in something until I witness it and the account Kwame gave me of music's relation to coexistence was something I looked at cynically and as a superficial form of integration.

Not being white in Derry

In my conversations with Kwame and other people who weren't of European descent, I discovered that I wasn't alone in my feelings of latent racism within the Northern Ireland society. John, though a white Englishman, had always mentioned how he had continually been witness to racism within Irish society, especially after his cousin's visit. He also told me of how Catholics and Protestants refer to the Police Service of Northern Ireland as the Black Bastards. I found this phrase to be very offensive because it is in so many words calling the police niggers, and this was a term used widely by many in Derry and throughout Northern Ireland. My flatmate this summer, Toshi, was a Japanese student who was working for his PhD in Peace and Coexistence Studies at the University of Ulster. He was often the victim of verbal discrimination because of his Japanese accent and physical characteristics. Though he took it in stride, I always had the urge to attack the fool who opened his mouth.

In Derry, every black person I saw either gave me a signal of acknowledgement or came up to me and started talking to me. The first time I really noticed the importance of acknowledging one another in such a small community was when I was walking down Foyle Street, the main street in town. I saw a black woman with her two children, one boy and one girl, in their school uniforms. Her son turned to look in my direction and saw my large Afro, and when he saw me he started to smile and proceeded to tap his sister on the shoulder, pointing out to her that there were other black people in town. After he grabbed his sister's attention, he threw up a fist in the air for black power, so I threw a fist right back at him. I found this to be a nice interaction between a couple of complete strangers and me. Our

race had bonded us in an area where we are so few. That moment helped me to realize that all over the globe, many black people still have a certain appreciation and acknowledgement of a similar struggle endured by others despite location.

Even though I am Irish and I take pride in my Irish heritage, I don't look Irish and in Derry, people didn't perceive me to be Irish. This in many ways has taken away from my pride in being Irish. Being both Irish and black in Ireland has shown me that the Irish have many racist stereotypes and fears of blacks. The racist tendencies I encountered in Northern Ireland made me reject many aspects of my Irish identity.

The racial discrimination that exists promotes stereotypes that I as a black man was raised to reject. I still know and believe that many Irish people aren't racist, and it's through these people that I take pride in my Irish heritage.

Music: Derry's Greatest Integrator

The week following my conversation with Kwame, the Centre began its annual Celtronic festival in which electronic, rock, jazz, hip-hop, punk, metal bands, and many other music groups come to perform from all over Europe. This event helped me to better understand what Kwame was talking about because until this point, the greatest levels of integration I found anywhere in Derry were at the integrated schools I visited. During one of the first nights of the festival a friend of mine, Nile, a hip-hop DJ, and his crew, the Silent Assassins, took to the stage. This was an unusual crew for Derry not only because it was a hip-hop group in an area dominated by guitar rock, but also because they were as religiously diverse as you can get in Ireland, being a Catholic, a Protestant, and a Muslim. They stepped on stage looking a little nervous in front of a crowd of 300. The hot and sticky club on the top floor of the Centre was packed with Derry locals in both Celtic and Rangers jerseys, which seemed stunning to me. The last time I was in a bar with adults wearing opposing team jerseys there was a fight that led to the police escorting half of the bar to a local prison. It was striking that Fountain and Bogside locals were there with no reason to antagonize one another, but the most stunning thing was that the majority of people in the club were under the age of 18. The youth were more active than their elders in participating in integrated events. Why does a group of 20 or so Irish kids have greater power than the local authorities to create an environment where Protestants and Catholics can hang out peacefully? Even after my trip, I am not sure if I am able to answer this question. But regardless of the fact that this integration may be superficial because it is driven by intoxication and loud bass, it is important to recognize music's strength in enabling people of both communities to come together under the same roof. Before the Centre, there were virtually no concerts or musical events in Derry because if the event was held in a certain neighborhood, people from the other group would feel intimidated and unwelcome. The Centre's neutral location within the walls of

Derry and policy of non-discrimination caters to members of both communities. In this instance music may not have been as great of a force in creating an environment of integration as the policies, location and mission of the Centre.

West Belfast

Though I recognize that there is a vast amount of segregation within Northern Ireland, I don't think that it is comparable to the apartheid and coercive segregation that many blacks faced in South Africa and other African nations. In Northern Ireland it is much harder to tell who your enemy is than in South Africa. Both Catholics and Protestants are white and have the privilege of invisibility, being unable to physically distinguish between who is of what religion. The best way to determine someone's identity is by which football jersey they wear or what neighborhood they are from. Neighborhoods throughout Northern Ireland are small ghettos of people of the same identity who litter their streets, curbs, walls and buildings with decorations that represent their identity. In my travels in Ireland, I found no better example of segregation and frustration than in West Belfast. On one of John's many trips into Belfast for the Nerve Centre he gave me a tour of the home of the IRA and UVF during the troubles. Every block is lined with identity markers. The Protestant side was filled with red, white and blue flags hanging over the streets in preparation for the 12th of July, the day of the Orange Order Parades. The Catholic areas have many murals depicting various events and people who are of importance to that community, such as the Christ-like depiction of the hunger striker, Bobby Sands. I really got an odd feeling when I was walking through both areas because I know of the great history of violence that occurred on the streets in the area. On nearly ever corner, there was a plaque in dedication to someone who was killed on that street. Violence there, at least the history of violence there, is inescapable. It truly was everywhere because in addition to the plaques on every corner, there were murals depicting local paramilitary figures as icons that should be worshipped and adorned by the entire community.

I first walked around Sandy Row, the Protestant stronghold in West Belfast. The mural that welcomes you to Sandy Row shows a paramilitary soldier standing with a gun claiming that the UVF will always defend Ulster's Protestants. This mural was stronger than the ones that I had seen in Derry, and a true advocate of violence. Many murals in this area were of local paramilitary members with gun in hand. Through these murals I distinguished that the people there have had a lot to deal with during the troubles and that this was a place where much of the troubles occurred. Another interesting aspect of culture in West Belfast that I noticed in Sandy Row was an Israeli flag hanging from a bar, which I did not see in Catholic communities. In Sandy Row and in other Protestant communities within Northern Ireland, people believed that Israel was a legitimate state and sided with Israel on the issue of the Middle East.

In the Republican stronghold of West Belfast, however, I saw graffiti that read "Free Palestine, Boycott Israeli Goods." The Catholic communities in Northern Ireland believe that Israel is an occupier of Palestine and feel a certain level of sympathy with the Palestinians because they feel that the Catholics and Palestinians are in the same boat. Catholics feel their situation is parallel to that of Palestinians because they feel as if they had their land stolen from them and are an oppressed minority within their society. Though I can see how both sides take their positions, I feel that many people from both communities believe in some of their beliefs as part of their identity without considering the facts of the situation.

At one point in West Belfast, in a Republican area, John pointed to a bar and said, "during the conflict, in order to have gone you had to have served a political sentence in jail". That is how crazy the situation was in West Belfast. Local institutions widely accepted and supported people doing violent acts towards the opposing communities and in many ways praised people for these acts. The bar was one of the nicest bars in that part of West Belfast, though it was secured to the teeth, with huge fences and security guards with baldheads, who were so muscular it appeared that they didn't have necks, standing outside guarding the bar. The bar must have been the place that many youths aspired to get into. In order to go to the "cool" bar you have to kill or do something really bad, while in the States in order to get into the "cool" bar you have to dress well and have pretty girls with you. Being in the heart of hostility and conflict in Northern Ireland made me question if integration is ever going to succeed in this deeply divided society.

This fear was supported by the events of the very next day, July 12th the beginning of the marching season in Northern Ireland. The marching season is often a time marked with violence and community tensions. On this day, Protestants celebrate King William defeating the Catholic King James in Ulster. The conflict on this day happens because Protestants often march through Catholic areas to signal that all of Ulster is Protestant. This is what my Irish Catholic friend Chris described as a big "fuck-you-we-still-run-this-place" type of thing to do. And yet, this day is also a day of picnics and family celebrations for many others. At the same time, many Catholics feel that some of the messages of the parade echo a sentiment of cultural superiority among Protestants.

This year in West Belfast, I witnessed Catholics riot against the police after a march in Protestant West Belfast. The Orange Order wasn't allowed to march down the main streets in the Catholic areas of West Belfast. Though the march itself didn't progress through West Belfast, the police did allow for the parade's supporters to march down the streets of the Republican stronghold while drunk. What irritated the Catholics was that these people were forbidden to walk down these streets during that day, but were afterwards protected by a police and army escort. At this point in the day both sides were drunk and when emotions are high and mixed with alcohol, violence is almost

inevitable. Many Catholic youths found the police escort to be an insult by the police and Parade Commission of Northern Ireland. With these feelings of resentment, many Catholics took to violence to defend their territory. It started off with rocks, then escalated into a mob of teens and adults finding any means possible to prevent any further intrusion by their enemies. People ran up to cops and beat them with bottles, the police's own batons, and with whatever shank they could find. The riot continued with people flipping over cop cars, and eventually, as is typical in Northern Ireland society, a number of petrol bombs were hurled at the police vehicles in the hopes of pushing the police out of the neighborhoods.

That night I took my questions about the day's events to Sandinos in order to try to come to terms with what I saw and felt. As soon as I met up with my friends Chris, a Derry local, and Paul, who had just returned from Liberia as an Irish peacekeeper, they immediately started discussing the events of the day. Paul began by saying that he thought that segregation was a feasible and non-violent way to create coexistence. His comments shocked me after a semester of listening to how integration and getting to know one another is the best way to create relationships which foster integration and change in my coexistence class. Paul was someone whose word I took seriously because he had been out there in the field working and fighting for peace in Africa. His belief that integration is more harmful than good shocked me. I found it hard to believe that peace situations such as Liberia and Rwanda were only created through the use of force and in some cases violence by international peacekeepers.

After Paul told me about his work in Liberia, we began to further discuss coexistence. He told me some of his ideas, which were contradictory to what I felt. We were talking about the issue of coexistence and what I thought would best help create coexistence in Northern Ireland. Almost instantly, I began talking about integration and creating greater intercommunity relationships. I told him that people must better understand one another to live peacefully and must be involved in one another's community in order to create a certain degree of coexistence. It was funny because though he thought what I said was interesting, he countered by stating that he thought segregation is the best way to keep and maintain coexistence. This way each group was able to sustain their identities and not be bombarded with the other group. He gave me the example of Russia and the U.S. during the Cold War. One of the greatest feuds between nations ever, but, since they were at such a distance from one another, nothing of significance ever happened. I found it extremely interesting to hear what he had to say about segregation as a positive method towards coexistence because he had worked on the grounds of a civil war to try to create peace in Liberia. He made me question why I believe in integration, and at the same time opened me up to another way of thought. Can a divided country in conflict be cured of its ills by separating enemy groups from one another?

I learned in my time in Derry and Northern Ireland that isolation and segregation only perpetuate stereotypes, tensions and a lack of understanding among communities. In a society where inter-religious marriage is looked down upon, any efforts for integration should be encouraged and alternative forms of coexistence related activities should be further sponsored. The work I witnessed by the Centre in trying to promote new outlets of coexistence and integration should be looked at as a model throughout the nation in providing communities with opportunities to promote integration. Otherwise, Northern Ireland will continue to be a society stricken with the continual fear of violence and a society that is psychologically and physically divided.

Telling the Facts

During my last few weeks at the Centre, John and a group of Centre filmmakers had a documentary of theirs air on BBC2, *The Battle of the Bogside*, which John bragged about weeks in advance to its showing. The film portrayed the events of the conflict through interviews with key players in the battle and through footage of the events from those days. This film gave first-hand insight from both Protestants and Catholics. The film portrayed the conflict as objectively as possible while highlighting the issues and reasons for the battle.

The documentary was extremely vivid, placing the audience in the heart of the fight. This film represented the Nerve Centre's mission of providing an artistic production and creative description of key events of the area to allow for all to attempt to better understand themselves and their "enemies". The documentary was a collaborative effort of Catholics and Protestants who made a conscious effort to give both perspectives and realities during the conflict. Though many hardcore Loyalists felt as if the documentary was too critical of the R.U.C. and British government, more felt as if the movie gave an accurate depiction of the events.

The Nerve Centre's approach towards coexistence is to educate through creativity. The non-intrusive approach of coexistence at the Centre allows for people who are sick of force-fed old-fashioned coexistence practices. The Centre creates an extremely casual atmosphere that doesn't pressure people to change their opinions or perspectives. Derry is a place of strong conviction, and the Centre allows people to express themselves creatively while simultaneously creating an integrated community through the arts. Everyone I met in Derry, whether Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Asian, Black, or White, all looked at the Center as a positive investment in their communities. Everyone in Derry appreciated the educational value and importance of the Nerve Centre. In a place where segregation is a way of life, the Nerve Centre provides an outlet where integration, coexistence and creativity are accomplished, even if they are accomplished on a small scale.

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