

## **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 was volunteered by her father who was on the Management Committee of the Tenants' Association. 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. Likewise, at Corrymeela she was fascinated by the variety of people she met there. This experience of working alongside young people was new for Maighread. She had never before been connected with the local Youth Club, choosing instead to study for exams. Later she chose to take a course in Youth & Community at St. Mary's University College.

Back in Belfast, the new experiences continued joining the volunteers for a meal at their accommodation near Queen's University. It was the first time she was in this area. Even the food seemed to be different - casseroles served with rice and salads. These new friends took an interest in Maighread, her story and her songs in Irish. 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 Belfast 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 estate and the Sandy Row Area. 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/Mulvenna family who later became members of the Corrymeela Community. For such a group to exist, transport was crucial, and this was provided by the RUC Community Relations branch. Maighread became good friends with the policeman, Albert Matchett – a friendship which has lasted to this day, some 50 years later! The group ran for two years and spent many weekends at Corrymeela, staying in the original wooden Village. She recalled worship with the group in the Quiet Room in the Old House. The young people, herself included, were not used to the informality of relaxing back on the sofas and praying and singing together! It was so different from the rituals at Sunday Mass. Aged 18, Corrymeela was a place of freedom away from the Troubles at home.

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 Garret 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. Doug would visit each summer and in 1977, he organised for Paddy and Maighread and their two little daughters 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.

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. Corrymeela helped her understand more about her Catholic faith and what she herself believed in. She was also interested to hear the faith stories of others. She found so often that they had prayers and hymns in common. Her growing awareness and confidence encouraged her to do new things, including a Certificate in Ecumenism in St. Anne's Cathedral.

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, interesting and a chance to leave the children at home with Paddy and have some welcome breathing space.

The Kennedy family was also involved in the Summer Fest celebrations at Corrymeela. Maighread helped with the coordination of the sharing groups. 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 Girard weekends with Roel Kaptein 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 of the reach of the Corrymeela Community. 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 and more recently she has volunteered on the family bereavement project with Cruse and Corrymeela. Her involvement in the local Newtownabbey cell group, regular meetings with some members, and singing with Voices Together also help her to keep connected.

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.