

Corrymeela reflections by Danny and Kate Todd

How and when did you get involved? Some key experiences

Danny Todd:

Paddy and Eileen Patterson asked me to help this fellow, John Baird, who was working in the docks area to paint a halfway house for mostly adult alcoholics. After that I stayed involved with Paddy and Eileen and was eventually invited to Corrymeela and volunteered with different projects. At the time I was working as a carpenter in Belfast. In 1969 I moved up to Corrymeela in Ballycastle to work fulltime with Billy McAllister. I worked at Corrymeela until early 1972, leaving to do youth work at the Shankill YMCA.

When I first came to Ballycastle and met Anna Glass, she asked me if I had a brother Joe and a sister Anna. I said yes, and she told me that during World War II (before I was born) my family had been evacuated to Ballycastle to Anna's family farm. My oldest brother Joe worked on the farm with Anna's brother. My sister was named for Anna Glass. Small world! Billy McAllister was a magnet for volunteers, who came for weeks in the summer and often on weekends in between. It was exciting to be part of Corrymeela at that time. This was when I became friends with David Stevens.

Billy was a character--twinkle in his eyes, quick wit, and master of all trades. On the eve of the first moonlanding in 1969, Billy and I went to Coleraine to pick up a used black and white TV for the family groups from the Shankill and Falls who were onsite. Billy got a parking ticket, and went back to Coleraine a few days later to protest at the police station. After overwhelming the police officer with Bible verses about being a "righteous man" the officer announced that divine intervention must have disposed of the ticket. In the end, the poor reception at Ballycastle meant we missed the actual moon landing, although we had our own version as Norman Richardson and Derick Wilson landed on the lawn outside in foil covered bins.

Kate Todd:

I first came to Northern Ireland in June 1972 as a volunteer via the National Council of Churches in the USA. One of my volunteer assignments was to work for a few weeks at Corrymeela. Since it was summer, the site was filled with work camps and family groups. I asked to stay on as a permanent volunteer. The most rewarding work was assisting the families who came to Corrymeela from the most troubled areas, especially the mothers and children. I particularly remember a young single mother from Sandy Row, and also Mrs. M. whose son had been badly burned. But I also fondly remember the fun and excitement of a late night visit to the haunted Bonamargy Friary.

While we all spent time cleaning bathrooms and washing and changing those awful nylon sheets between groups of visitors, for me, my favorite tasks were in the kitchen. Mrs. Mac taught me to make shortbread and scones, both of which I still make. Anna was the rock upon which that kitchen was built. She spoke little, but her directions made clear in very few words. They were both very kind to me and I loved being with them.

On midweek evenings, when there were no groups on site at Ballycastle, Billy would hold court around the supper table. Our small residential group included Ricky and Anime from Germany, Miriam, Margaret, and our lone Englishman, John. One memorable night Billy rounded the table expounding on all our future marriage prospects. I remember being astonished that he was interested in this topic, and even more astonished at how perceptive he was about us all.

What are your links now? How has Corrymeela affected your life?

Both Danny and Kate

We met through Corrymeela, almost 50 years ago now. Ray Davey happened to be in the United States when we were married and participated in our wedding. After the birth of our son John, Anna Glass and her sister Gwen visited us in Evanston. We still have the teddy bear they gave to John, which John's son Jack kisses and hugs on every visit.

We have been able to keep in touch with many friends from our Corrymeela days by letter and email and all too infrequent visits. Mathilde Stevens remains a good friend and faithful correspondent. We have hosted many members of the Corrymeela family at our home over the years, and have been happy to support the work of Corrymeela in this small way. During this pandemic it has been wonderful to listen to "from the Croi" messages. Corrymeela has affected us most through the memories and friendships we cherish of the caring and generous people we met and worked with as part of the community. Corrymeela has been a guiding path for both our lives.

What does reconciliation mean to you?

Reconciliation means being open to and inclusive of those who are not "like" us. We have tried to participate in projects that include rather than exclude, such as access to voting rights, meals for homeless families, and coaching youth teams with disabled players. Our experiences at Corrymeela taught us how to meet and connect with others from very diverse backgrounds. The recent presidential election has shown all of us in the United States how much reconciliation work needs to be done to heal our racial, economic, religious and political divisions.