

“The Hurricane’s coming to get yez...”

By 2008 intergenerational relations in East Wall community which had been fraught for some time, where at an all-time low. Based in St. Mary’s Youth Club on Strangford Road in Dublin 3, East Wall Youth Project in partnership with Nascadh the local Community Development Project sought to work together to improve fractured intergenerational relations. As generations from both ends of the age spectrum find a new found respect for each, youth workers Eileen Vaughan and Willie Dwyer outline how intergenerational programmes have made a significant difference in the local community.

There is gentle whisper in the room as 16 year old Ryan Savage stares down the vast expanse of the full length green snooker table. Young Ryan is quietly contemplating his next move in this game of minds. Behind him sits his group of friends dressed in hip tracksuits, trendily gelled hair styles and fashionably pierced ears. All are well groomed and as smartly turned-out as any contemporary adolescent. Each sits quietly in support and anticipation of Ryan’s next shot.

The score is close and this teenage team really need this pot to stay in the game. As Ryan leans over the left side of the 12 foot by 6 foot snooker table and draws back the cue beneath his chin, the silence in the room is as they say; ‘golden’. The gentle but sudden clash of the cue on white ball disrupts the stillness. There is an anxious wait as the cue ball gently rolls down the table towards the red ball, which hangs tantalisingly above the bottom right hand pocket.

The clatter of white on red is immediately followed by a broad grin on Ryan’s face and a loud chorus of “well done” from his peers and the larger group of elderly gentlemen at the other end of the table. In contrast to the teenagers these gents are clean shaven, dressed in crisply ironed shirts and ties, suit jackets or round neck jumpers. Not one has gelled hair or sports ear pierced bling, at least not today. Ryan, the youth ‘captain’ has for his part kept the teenagers in the game. There is a marked rise in the volume as these elder gentlemen suddenly banter with 80 year old Tommy Keogh who is Ryan’s opponent and playing for the honour of the ‘older’

generation. There is not a man under the age of 72 among them and they relish the opportunity to torment Tommy regarding his playing ability and capacity to win the round.

And so the snooker game progresses back and forth for the afternoon with several players from each generation stepping up to do their team justice. Skilful (and of course fluky) shots on both sides are rewarded with applause. The banter between generations is both gentle and friendly and when a player steps up to take their shot there is utter silence. As the game is played out old and young afforded each other a level of respect that is thought provoking. By 5pm the teenagers have won. As for the older generation, there's always tomorrow. The school mid-term break is not over yet and the Intergenerational Snooker Competition runs for another two days.

Here in East Wall Youth Project we have been striving to offer Intergenerational Programmes since the publication of 'East Wall Older Persons Needs Analysis Report' in 2008. A needs analysis for the local Senoir Citizen Population conducted in East Wall by Nascadh the local Community Development Project (CDP), the report highlighted that most respondents to the Survey said that they felt safe living in the area. However nearly 50% lived alone and a significant number of older people said they did not go out at all during the evening or night-time. Increasingly elderly people were feeling less connected to the community and their perception of the community's youth population was particularly poor. Young people were often seen as disruptive, and troublesome. Many highlighted teenage anti-social behaviour as the worst part of living in the East Wall community.

Like any other community in Dublin, East Wall has its share of crime but there were two serious incidents in the winter of 2008 which plummeted elderly opinions of local youth to an all-time low. In the first incident a young man in his 20's was stopped and shot in the leg as he walked a local street. In a second incident a local resident died following a shooting involving teenagers outside his home. Both incidents and the ensuing media frenzy in which one tabloid news paper labelled local children as "feral" did little to improve the elderly population's perception of local youth and a general observation of a complete breakdown in intergenerational relations.

Nascadh felt that intergenerational relations were an important issue and needed positive interventions to enhance the quality of life of local elderly residents. In this context they approached us in the local Youth Project with a view to developing and establishing an Intergenerational Programme. At the time intergenerational relations had become a frequent topic of discussion in the Youth Project too. We couldn't believe how a small number of 'bad eggs' were tarnishing the reputation of all young people in the community. We were aware that local adolescents were increasingly being seen as 'trouble' but we knew from working and developing positive relationships with many of them that this just simply wasn't the case.

In the following months when the tabloid media commented on a range of anti-social behaviours or serious criminal incidents involving adolescents across various communities in the city, East Wall was frequently drawn back into the public eye. Consequently we knew changing local attitudes towards our teenage population would be a significant and prolonged challenge, but we knew we had to advocate on behalf of a generation that was creative, intelligent, talented, lively and eager to positively contribute to their local community. We were determined with Nascadh's support to show our senior citizens that our young people weren't as bad as they were being portrayed and to wider society, that East Wall was a positive community in which to reside.

In the run up to the summer of 2009 we decided we would pilot a trial Drop-In Intergenerational Programme on a Friday afternoon. We invited in a group of elderly ladies and gentlemen to join a mixed group of teenagers coming in after school. We'd make a pot of tea, put plenty of biscuits on the table, and set up the karaoke machine for an hour's sing-song. Later a Salsa dancing teacher would come in and the ladies would go into the dance room, where they learned how to Salsa Dance with the teenage girls while the men and the young lads played snooker. It quickly progressed to the point where we were looking forward to Friday afternoon because of all the fun and excitement and it was a great opportunity to hear some of the teenagers sing. We hadn't realised how talented they were until this programme had started.

The initial pilot was very successful but the feedback on the engagement with the young lads was particularly interesting. Local teenage boys who had up until then been perceived as a 'threat', or 'gang' on a street corner to be avoided were tentatively seen as individuals with names and personalities, someone you could sit with, speak to and get to know. All of a sudden when the two generations were meeting one another on the street they began nodding towards each other by means of a greeting and slowly they began stopping and talking to each other. Here in the project we were so excited and began to feel that a tiny fissure in the barrier between the 'generations' had just opened!

On completing our 2009 Summer Project we reviewed the pilot Intergenerational Programme in September. What started as an experimental programme and a little bit of fun had been warmly welcomed at both ends of the age spectrum. We knew we had to continue the programme in some fashion and that the snooker table would be a vital resource in continuing to engage the teenage boys in intergenerational work with the elderly gentlemen of the community. While reviewing available times in the Project to continue the programme, consideration was given to the forth coming school Mid-term break, when a lot of our young people hang about the streets. In an effort to sustain the programmes fledgling momentum and offer a constructive programme to our teenage lads during mid-term, it was agreed to run a full snooker competition over several days during the October Mid-term.

While there was plenty of tea, biscuits and bundles of laughter the October competition was 'serious business'. If you talked out loud, out of turn you got a right telling off from teenagers and seniors alike. Over the last three years the 'mid-term' Intergenerational Snooker Competitions Programme has taken on a life of its own. The snooker competitions are now played out over several days and held three or four times over the course of a year. It's funny to think that following that October in 2009, it was the seniors who looked for the next competition and now no sooner than a competition starts, they just want to know when the next one will be.

As part of the competition we don't have any runners up just a winners' cup. When the seniors win the cup goes to the Senior Citizens Club around the corner and if the

teenagers win the cup stays here in the Youth Project till the next competition. While both generations take winning the cup seriously, it's all in the spirit of great sportsmanship with plenty of good craic and banter along the way. The last competition concluded with our oldest player Tommy Tiernan who is 93 years old handing the cup back to Ryan Shevlin who at 14 is the youngest member of the teenager's team.

In 2010 the Dublin Dockland Senior Forum conducted a further Docklands area survey on the needs of local Senior Citizens. A repeated theme for Senior Citizens in the survey was 'fear', *"I'm petrified to walk by a gang of kids when I'm by myself"*. Following the results of this survey Care Local, a non-profit organisation which works to alleviate loneliness and isolation in Dublin's older community, facilitated two local forums in East Wall with senior citizens and younger people to explore these fears.

During the Forums younger people expressed a view of feeling unfairly judged and stereotyped by older people, *"Some of them might be afraid because there is a group of us and we're loud but we're not doing anything"*. They also felt a lack of respect did not really know where they belonged and did not know what they should do to be seen positively in the eyes of older people. *"I've often said hello to an older person and they just blank you, like you're not even there"*. There was a realisation that the stories were the exact reverse between the two groups and communication was urgently needed to help understanding between the generations, to see things from each other's perspective.

In response, East Wall Youth continued its Intergenerational Programmes and in partnership with Care Local, Nascadh and with funding from Dublin Bus, created the 'It's Time To Talk: Fear, Respect and Understanding' DVD programme, which explores the main themes of discussion raised during the forums. This DVD contains three short videos, each based on a separate interaction between younger and older people and additional resource materials for discussion groups. Designed as a learning tool to create dialogue between the generations it's an excellent resource for projects undertaking intergenerational work.

It aims to raise awareness regarding the negative stereotyping of older and younger people within our communities and in doing so encourages communication between the generations in order to eliminate social isolation and encourage participation which benefits wider society as a whole. From September 2012 it will be presented by trained Care Local Intergenerational Coaches to both schools and older people's organisations across the country.

Following on from the phenomenal success of the intergenerational snooker programme, intergenerational work has continued between the elderly women and teenage girls of the community too. Periodically we run craft programmes such as, jewellery making and silk painting that are regularly attended by the elderly ladies who mix extremely positively with the young girls. These programmes are by nature relaxing and create an environment where each generation can help each other, admire each other's work and see each other as being more human.

We often ask ourselves has one snooker table and a handful of intergeneration programmes in our youth project really helped change our community? Have our programmes really changed the very negative perceptions that generations at either end of the spectrum have held of each other?

While it has been a very slow process we firmly believe they have and that interaction is spreading between younger and older people across the community. The feedback from young and old alike is encouraging. The older generation say they are no longer uncomfortable or scared passing young people as they walk through the community. Young people now greet them as they pass. When an older man goes into the local shops, he's greeted with 'How's it goin' Liamo!' rather than the verbal abuse that was communicated in the past. It's a simple thing but it never happened before. That type of interaction as it becomes more frequent is priceless and older people are changing their attitudes towards the communities' younger generation.

Recently of a late evening, we stopped on a local street to speak with four of the young lads who are regular project participants. As we chatted one of our seniors,

who lives two doors away, came out his front door. One of the young lads politely called out “don’t forget tomorrow Liam, the snooker”. To a furore of laughter Liam who is not a day under 70 imitated taking a snooker shot with an imaginary cue and replied simply “don’t worry; the hurricane is coming to get yez”. Five years ago if you were to suggest such a friendly interaction like that would take place on the street between a senior citizen and a teenager in East Wall, people would have laughed at you!

In 2012 our Intergenerational Snooker Programme and Intergenerational Ladies Programmes also made it onto the national airwaves. Recorded in December 2011 without pre-scripting and aired on the 14th of February 2012 on RTÉ’s Morning Ireland programme, a number of our Senior Citizens spoke of their experiences engaging with the young people in the project. They spoke in glowing terms of the success of the programmes in recent years. Overall the youth of our community have started to develop a new found respect for the older generation and while everybody tells young people ‘you have to have respect for your elders’ here in East Wall the tide is turning, the seniors have begun to develop respect for the teenagers which is an extremely positive outcome.

In our opinion this is one of the most encouraging developments in all our work. The older generation no longer look down on the young people or see them as troublemakers and slowly intergenerational friendships are developing. It’s absolutely fantastic to see especially for an area that has had so much negative publicity in recent years that’s not deserved. Finally the cycle of mistrust and fear has been broken and the future for all generations in East Wall community is that little bit brighter...