

United for Change

*Young people's experiences of a
'United Youth' pilot programme*

Compiled by Michael Hall

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Northern Ireland Youth Forum: United for Change



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Introduction

The *N.I. Youth Forum: United for Change* project is part of the Northern Ireland Executive 'United Youth' programme, and falls under 'T:BUC' [Together: Building a United Community]. This programme currently embraces thirteen pilot projects, targeting 360 young people. Our project involves working with 24 young people over an eight-month period (split into two groups of twelve, the first group commencing five months before the second). The young people, both male and female, are between the ages of 16 and 24 (and fall under 'NEET' [Not in Education, Employment or Training]), and were selected, on a cross-community basis, from Antrim and Newtownabbey.

Under Phil Glennon as Co-ordinator, we run a three-day-a-week programme, in partnership with the University of Ulster, Jordanstown. Our four main areas of focus, reflecting the United Youth outcomes, are: Personal and Social Development, Good Relations, Citizenship, and Employability. The linkage with UU is also about breaking down barriers to education. One participant hadn't left her house in over two years, as she suffers from anxiety and depression. She is not alone among the group in having experienced depression and mental health issues. So from having very few qualifications, if any, to now be attending university, is a real leap. Also, some of the young people have limited experience of working in a group setting – including working on a cross-community basis.

In line with our four primary areas of focus we have had the young people experience a rich and varied programme of activities. They have engaged in discussions on issues such as sectarianism, prejudice, discrimination, cultural identity and more. The group took part in the inaugural Youth Congress annual sitting which included a debate in the Assembly Chamber, attended by MLAs and chaired by the Speaker of the Assembly, Mitchel McLaughlin. They have participated in residential for group development, experiential learning and building relationships. They have engaged with the PSNI, ex-combatants, ethnic minorities and in a consultation around parades. They visited Germany, staying in Hamburg and Berlin, and this is to be followed – near the end of the programme – by a visit to Poland to explore the impact of genocide and discrimination.

In terms of our methodology we have approached this in a three-tiered layer. We adopted a 'relentless youth work approach' to our engagement with the young people. A full-time Relentless Youth Worker was employed for the duration of the project. This 'stop at nothing' approach, designed to reach out to participants and

empower them to make positive, healthy and life-changing decisions, building transformational relationships working through the ‘stages of change’, has been pivotal in our approach throughout the programme. The Relentless Worker has certainly achieved, and excelled in, the aforementioned, flourishing in her role. Without her the programme simply would not have worked and she is without doubt a huge driving force in what we believe to be one of our many successes.

Underpinning our approach has been the adoption of our ‘Champions of Change’ methodology. Through this approach we support young people to achieve change in four key areas of their lives: Personal, Peer, Community and Societal. Examples include personal growth and development, a peer education approach where young people lead a second group of participants, work placements in communities, and lobbying for change and being involved in consultations regarding societal issues.

Interestingly, we fused together an informal and formal educational approach to group-work and learning and believe something magical took place here. Key to the success of the project has been the ability to support young people to understand the legacy of the past and link it to their contemporary lives. Good Relations has been a cornerstone within the programme, ranging from local and international opportunities, and our partnership with University of Ulster has enabled young people to be educated on conflict, division and community relations by leading academics in the field, gaining university accreditation.

Dr Jonny Byrne of the University of Ulster commented: “This was an opportunity to work in partnership with the NI Youth Forum, to combine academic and youth work approaches, and to engage with an amazing set of young people. The project broke down stereotypes about what the University represented and created a safe and positive learning environment in which the participants engaged in a range of challenging issues, ranging from commemoration, peace and conflict, culture and identity, to policing and the peace process.”

As well as these mechanisms, other notable key mechanisms have been the opportunities to give young people wide-ranging experiential learning opportunities to complement their informal/formal learning, something we believe creates empathy and a chance to ‘walk in different shoes’.

Participants benefited from incentive payments for participating in the programme. Young people face tough realities on a daily basis and finance is one of them. All participants have stated that this has really helped to support them. We also believe that international learning opportunities are pivotal, for a range of reasons, not least giving young people a chance to live and breathe in another country

and stretch their comfort zones beyond their own origins.

This programme was ‘youth-led’ in its design. Phase 1 involved process and building capacity to enable young people to design and deliver a programme for other young people based on T:BUC and United Youth. We adopted a ‘purist’ approach in that nothing was predetermined and young people would be free to design a programme with a budget to be delivered to their peers. The learning from this aspect has been phenomenal, with outcomes and ‘distance travelled’ remarkable.

The staff have been greatly heartened by the impact the programme has had on the participants. But rather than us describe this impact we felt it would be good to let the young people speak for themselves. An independent evaluation was commissioned to interview six of the group, to let them reflect openly and honestly. Given that we wanted this pamphlet to be ready before the group finishes, and mindful of the time required to compile it, the interviews were conducted just as the young people were beginning their community-based placements. Nevertheless, we felt that the benefits of the programme had already become obvious, a belief confirmed by the personal stories recounted here.

Life-changing experiences

Chris Quinn, Director, Northern Ireland Youth Forum

The Youth Forum’s United for Change project was designed to offer young people real and meaningful life-changing experiences.

As practitioners in the field of youth participation we have seen the value in providing the time, space and support for young people to explore and understand the difficult issues. The legacy of the past continues to be played out on our streets, debating chambers and in the media. Young people continue to suffer as a result of a long, and arguably ongoing, conflict. We live in a society which may never find agreement on issues such as flags, commemorations, bonfires, and the past. This is compounded by a policy-making process which seldom takes into account the views and needs of young people, austerity measures weighted against the young, and high levels of youth unemployment – all of which present a multitude of complex barriers for our young people, who represent one third of the population. Young people have called for a change – they deserve better.

The Youth Forum saw T:BUC, and in particular the United Youth element, as a potential vehicle to bring about some of the changes that young people deserve. The

pilot programme offered us an opportunity to try something a little bit different: something very targeted, truly youth-led, needs-based and evidence-driven. We carefully planned to make an impact on young people's lives in a sustainable way. The Youth-Led approach was paramount to achieving this, with our project delivered through key stages to equip young people with the skills and knowledge to design and deliver a programme for their peers. This approach meant that there would be variables – nothing was predetermined and the young people were to be in control. The United Youth team at DEL fully embraced this concept and we feel, understand and value the concepts of youth participation, participative democracy and social justice; and their relevance within a peace-building context.

Key to this programme have been the Relentless Youth Work approach and our link with the University of Ulster coupled with an overseas element, complementary to young people's learning and designed to broaden horizons as well as provide unique life-changing experiences. The benefits of overseas experiences for young people are well-documented and the young people have spoken of its impact. We came across Relentless Youth Work a number of years ago, and whilst we would acknowledge that we have a lot more to learn about the methodology, this programme proved to us that it is something with huge potential. The onus on forgiving, transformational relationships has resulted in powerful outcomes. These relationships have allowed us to support young people to overcome barriers and build confidence to reach their full potential. The University element has been remarkable. This aspect was designed as a mechanism for building aspiration and belief; to afford young people the opportunity to attend university as a student, being taught by leading academics in the field of conflict resolution, the conflict and sociology; having an impact on a personal level and also amongst peers, family and community. The qualification is important, but for us the experience and building of self-belief more so.

The teaching at University of Ulster as well as in workshop facilities by NIYF allowed young people to begin to untangle the legacy of the past, as a means of understanding the implications that it has to their contemporary lives; as well as removing internal barriers, promoting empathy, stimulating critical thinking and moving towards 'building a united community'.

It has been a remarkable experience working on this project from design through to delivery and now evaluation. Our United for Change project has had a major impact on young people and those close to them. We have benefited from a highly skilled and dedicated staff team – who stop at nothing to offer truly life-changing experiences for young people; without them the project would not have been the success it has been.

The young people:

‘D’ (*male*)

I live in Rathcoole, which is a predominantly loyalist estate. So that was always a constant pressure growing up. Especially when as a young person you go out, trying just to have fun, and the police were constantly on your back.

Growing up we would all get involved in rioting and stuff. But it was something I never really enjoyed, I was always more of a bystander. But all your mates were going over [to the interface], and it was either sit in the house or go with them but stand at the back. It was something I didn't enjoy.

Abbeycentre [shopping centre] would be close to where I live, and when I was younger my friends and I would have gone over there, and there were times when we were surrounded by Catholics and we were lucky we weren't bated; but with the security staff there they couldn't do anything and we were able to get away. But that sense of threat, that feeling of intimidation, was always there, and the name-calling that came with it – ‘Orange bastards!’ and all that. But it is something that young people, from *all* communities, and throughout Northern Ireland, face at some time in their lives.

That sense of threat, that feeling of intimidation... is something that young people, from all communities throughout Northern Ireland, face at some time in their lives.

My mum is a very chilled-out sort of person, and always told me to treat other people the way you want to be treated yourself. My dad would have had a different point of view, he would have had a very loyalist mindset towards things. But growing up I have taken what I've needed from both: from my dad – wanting to learn a bit more about my history and my culture, and from my mum – the idea of just giving things a go. My mum always urged me to go into cross-community things. And through youth work I began to see that Catholics are just people like me, and that helped break the barriers down, and I started to get on with them. I have been involved in youth work quite a while, but it is only in the last three or four years where you can see barriers between young people coming down, and you can actually be in a room together without that old tension, and have a laugh together, get on with one another.

I constantly change my opinion, especially when I learn more and more about certain things. I'd say I would be a completely different person now than what I was

before. At the same time I would never have classified myself as being a bitter person – it was more or less peer pressure which made me do what everyone else was doing and think the way everyone else was thinking. Anyway, I believe a lot of this stuff is all passed down through the older generation; young people wouldn't have hated other young people from the 'other side' if someone hadn't given them a reason to hate them: "They're this or that; you should have nothing to do with the likes of them!" I think the older generation are largely responsible for why young people don't like the 'other side', and why sectarian mindsets still exist.

Anyway, when I finished school I came out with pretty good GCSEs – nine Cs and above. Went on to a sports course but found that it wasn't for me. Tried something else but found that wasn't for me either. And then I picked up an injury. So I went from being busy all the time to doing absolutely nothing, and I was waiting a year and a half for an operation. I then broke my leg a week before I was supposed to go for the operation so that set me back even more! I am only now finally getting on the go. So there was a lot of time sitting about doing nothing, and I was getting depressed. I had nothing to look forward to. And then Natalie introduced me to this programme, and I got on to it.

I feel that I would be in a completely different place if it wasn't for the programme; it has given me an insight into what I really want to do, and let me experience new things. There are so many things in the programme which I had never done, or never dreamed I was going to do. That has been a big thing to me.

One of the girls from this course is from [nationalist] Bawnmore and we get on brilliant. I think the future will be better; I certainly won't be passing all that negative, sectarian stuff on to my kids. I will tell them that everyone is a person, and to treat them as you would like to be treated yourself. No-one is born to hate other people; there are experiences you have, or influences on you, which make you not like other people. Having said all that, to be honest, I would still feel uncomfortable going into Catholic areas, but it is something I challenge myself on, I try to work on. Because I don't feel that I really need to be scared, or on edge, when I am in those communities. I know people in those communities who would reassure me that I would be okay, but that fear is still in the back of your head.

Germany was an outstanding experience. We spent four days in Hamburg and then three in Berlin. And while we were there we did a number of different things. We went to an Anne Frank exhibition, and we went to Bergen-Belsen. That really hit home for me, when you seen the photos of actually how it was. But also when we were over in Germany there were many migrants. You see it all over the media, and the media puts certain thoughts into your head; it often focuses on any bad

things that they're doing and it makes you think negatively about them, stereotyping millions of people because of the way a few might get on. But in Hamburg we were going to the main train station, and outside the station there were hundreds of migrants. Local volunteers had set up a sort of first-aid and clothing distribution centre just outside the station, and we got to see at first hand people who were fleeing war zones, things like that. And that was a big eye-opener to me, and helped change my opinion about things. Throughout the programme you are constantly challenged. And the same with those migrants: "Why do you think they are leaving their homes? Can you put yourself in their situation?" And that has helped me think about things differently. Just because *I* might see things a certain way doesn't mean that that is the only way it is.

We plan to go to Poland in March, and go to see Auschwitz and places like that. Can't wait to go. In fact, one of my long-term goals now is to travel the world. I find that Northern Ireland is too small. I don't want to stay in one place; there's so much out there. I would love to visit Asia.

In the programme we have done workshops going deep into issues such as sectarianism. There was one we done called 'My street' and we were presented with some stereotypical characters – a Catholic priest, an Orangeman... people like that – and you were to decide who you would want in your community, living in your street. The first thing you might say, just going on first impressions, was: "I don't want so-and-so in my street because he's a... I would rather have that other person." But then we were told more details about these people, some of it positive, some of it negative, and you realised that your first impressions were flawed and had to be changed. The point of it all was to show you how we prejudice people before we know anything about them. ***The staff on the programme have been really good at trying to challenge us regarding our views and perceptions.*** The staff on the programme have been really good at trying to challenge us regarding our views and perceptions. They will throw different things into the debates at times which stir things up, but which make you think differently about things and people. That has been good.

My self-esteem, my confidence, has definitely increased because of the programme. There was one day we were all up at Stormont – it was a youth conference event, and we had a debate. And there was a sheet pinned up telling you the motions to be discussed that day. And one of the fellas said to me. "I see you're speaking today." I said, "No." "Well, it says your name here." And I says, "Not a chance! I'm not doing this!" But we had a 'motivational speaker' introduce the

event, and listening to him you began to believe more in yourself, and I actually thought: maybe I *can* do this. So I prepared a wee speech and delivered it in front of a hundred young people. I never thought I could ever have done something like that. So, in those sorts of things, I have seen my confidence grow hugely. And even being in Stormont was special. I mean, people don't normally get to see places like that, get to experience at first hand places which we are supposed to be a part of.

My own speech was on mental health and it was one of the topics which was sent on to the MLAs for their own discussion, so I was proud of that. I have suffered from mental health issues and my family members have suffered too. Just before I joined this course it was something I was struggling with, especially after my injury – really low mood, depression, finding it hard to cope at times. I wasn't on medication but I had turned to drugs: cannabis and things like that. But from I got on the course it has helped me start to believe in myself, gave me a better insight into who I was. Just because you're having a bad day doesn't mean your whole life is going to be shit. Before, I was thinking: this is it, this is what it's always going to be like. But coming onto the programme has helped me with ways to rebound when I am feeling low, ways to work with myself, to overcome any bad moods. That has helped me huge.

Our group got to programme the whole second half of the new programme coming on. It was about: what worked best for us, what things maybe didn't work so well, how could they be made better? Three of us were actually asked to get involved in the other programme, like a placement sort of thing, as part of the staff team. And to me it's class that now I'm part of the new programme starting up. So that has been quite an interesting journey for me, to say the least.

With having worked in other youth schemes what I have found different with this programme is the intensity of it, and its worth. Not just for me, but I have seen the growth in other people in the group – their increased confidence and other things. And I think a lot of that is because the funding allows for things to be done which will actually help. In other programmes which I have been on, there is maybe a six-week scheme and the youth leader is given a small budget to run it for twelve people, but which doesn't really allow for a variety of activities to take place. But the more you can put into a programme the more you will get out of it. In other schemes there is only so much you can do before the resources run out and things start to get boring, whereas what they offer [here] is so much more: the trips abroad, the event at Stormont, the residential, the involvement with the University of Ulster, the workshops, the discussions....

The second half of our programme is going to focus on employability and work placements. Now that we have been given help with life skills and personal development, we move on to how to do CVs and apply for jobs, as well as find out what type of jobs you might actually want to do, and how you get your foot in the door. We also do one-on-ones with the staff, looking at where we see ourselves going after the programme, what we want to do. They will try to get you experience of that, through placements, and then hopefully things will progress from there. I personally would like to find employment in youth work.

[Question: name three things, if any, about the United for Change programme which had a significant impact on you.]

Staff – that would be a big one for me. I have found in the past that some people in youth work don't really understand the pressures of growing up in communities like ours, the pressure of drugs, paramilitaries and things. And I think the staff here – Phil, Natalie and Chrissy – have been great, they have been able to work with you on a one-to-one basis, to see how you are coping, and then in the group setting they work wonders. That would be my main one.

Germany. It was amazing. Bergen-Belsen really hit home for me.

But the biggest impact has been on my own personal growth. Stormont helped me a lot; from there onwards I felt a lot more confident going into group situations. On Monday we were in with the new group and I initially felt dead nervous, but once things got going it all ran smoothly, and I just stopped worrying. Whereas before I would have been constantly worrying; this time I just ran with it.

I think a lot of youth work, especially poorly-funded work, is just there to keep young people off the streets, and there are too few

youth workers in each estate for all the young people there are. The young people just get bored, and turn to drugs and other things. But this programme is intensive and you're getting new experiences and picking up different skills all the time, and the insight and the challenge to look at things differently. You're coming out being able to

You're coming out being able to say: right, this might be a shit situation I'm in, but what can I do to help myself?

say: right, this might be a shit situation I'm in, but what can I do to help myself? Instead of saying: oh well, there's nothing for me, I'm stuck with what I have. And if there is nothing in Rathcoole for me, then why not think of looking outside it; and now I know of organisations which can help me do that.

My parents notice a big difference. My mum and dad are separated. I would say that my mum sees a great difference in me, because before it I would have been

sitting in my bedroom doing nothing, not happy with life. Every day was just another boring, grey day in Belfast – that’s the way I was looking at it. Whereas now I’m more energetic about the house and having more of a laugh. When I told my dad years ago that I was doing cross-community stuff with Catholics, at the start he would have been going, “I wouldn’t bother with themuns!” But now he’s not like that, he would ask: “What type of things are youse doing? That sounds brilliant.” So I have seen a bit of a change with him, from me going into these things and filling his ears with it. Now, he thinks about these things more.

But in myself I see huge growth.

‘N’ (*male*)

I grew up in a loyalist neighbourhood. I grew up not wanting to get along with other religions, but as I got older, I started to mix more, and started hanging about with different people. But last year I was walking through an estate near me and four Catholics jumped on me. I ended up in hospital overnight, my whole face was swollen right out like a balloon. I never went near there for months; in fact, it was only last week that I walked in through there again by myself. But I see them just as thugs, not as Catholics.

I also ended up getting myself into a load of bother and ended up in young offenders’ centres – Beechcroft and others – and quite a few care homes as well. That was before I turned fifteen, and then when I turned fifteen I got addicted to solvents for quite a while. I actually found my friend dead behind the health centre in Antrim, because of solvents – aerosols.

My dad died when I was thirteen, and it was after that that I started going downhill. I had been close to him. And my mum is ill as well; she has got Crohn’s disease. Every time I went away from home her Crohn’s disease would have flared up, because of all the stress. She was in hospital too because of the stress.

And then I started in Belfast Met and got a bit of counselling. After that I didn’t get along too well in my last placement and had to leave it. I went to Oasis, which was a school where disadvantaged young people went to, who couldn’t go to other schools. I went there for a year, and they got me signed up on this programme.

I love this programme. I had worked with other young people before but this programme is more beneficial, the engagement is much better. Whenever we went over to Germany we had a bit of free time in Hamburg. I seen all the migrants all sitting outside the train station and I sat down for a bit, by myself,

talking to them, asking them about their backgrounds and all. I was talking to one woman – she must have been in her mid-twenties – who had two wee kids with her, and she told me her husband had died on their way over to Europe. I found that very emotional, I was overwhelmed. When you see people on a one-to-one basis it is so different from reading about them in the media. The whole experience of going to Germany was great. It was a good time. As well as that I got my head showered getting away from here. I would love to do more travelling.

I found [talking to the migrants] very emotional. When you see people on a one-to-one basis it is so different from reading about them on the media.

We talk about discrimination and sectarianism on the programme, and we are all open in our views. I find myself listening to other viewpoints. I think we all need to work towards finding compromise.

I think the programme has given me more self-confidence. The team-building is good. Before I came on the programme I didn't know what I was going to do with myself, I was lying in bed all day.

I feel I have picked up personal skills from the programme. I done a speech at Stormont. I didn't even know I was doing it until I got there. When I saw my name on the list it was a real shocker, so it was! But I done it. My theme was discrimination between younger people and older people, such as the price of car insurance for new drivers, stuff like that there. It just came into my head. As I was talking I felt confident.

I don't think this country will change for a good while yet; it'll take a lot more years. As for young people having different attitudes, I don't know. Anyone who goes to some sort of youth group, or a school like Oasis, they get taught about discrimination, they get taught about sectarianism, and the divide between Catholics and Protestants. Whereas normal schools don't really talk about the religious divide. So young people who *don't* get involved in discussions about sectarianism probably won't change. But I think that for those young people who *do* engage in those discussions, it definitely helps to change their attitudes. But many young people are just out on the streets every night causing havoc, like I was, and that won't change unless they have the opportunity to get on to programmes like this. The brother of the friend of mine who I found dead is going to be joining the next course.

The first time I sat down with the Catholics in the group I was happy enough to be there, and knowing that it was a controlled environment helped to reassure

everyone that it wouldn't get out of hand. There's no point in hating people for nothing. On this particular programme we all get on really good together.

We also had a residential at Hillyard House, Castlewellan. And we are going to Poland; I can't wait for that trip. In Germany we had a local guy called Matteus who was great and he could relate to us all, and answer any questions.

Belsen-Bergen was a bit overwhelming, like. I had previously watched videos and films about the war, including at secondary school, but I never really took it into consideration. But once you actually got there it was something shocking.

The staff are really good, they are really helpful.

I hope to go back into education when it is over. I reckon I will go to the Tech after the programme finishes. I have already got two years at Belfast Met doing Engineering, but I am not sure if I would go on to do my Level 3, or do Computer Engineering or something like that.

[Name three things which to you were significant about the programme]

Germany.

The first residential: that was up at Sheep Island, Ballintoy. We went coasteering, so we did – loved it. We all got to tell our life stories.

Not only has my perception of Catholics changed, but my perception of my own identity has also changed. I feel I am more aware. I don't know how to describe it, but I have more of a clear head. In terms of the 'divide' here in this country I don't really think about it. What's the point? It is only going to bring up negative emotions. As for my identity, I am just a Northern Irish *me*.

Kelsie

Sectarianism wasn't really a big thing in my estate because my whole estate – Springfarm in Antrim – would have been mixed, although today there are probably more Catholics. There is never a big issue with sectarianism but when it does happen it is usually around specific events. Like the Eleventh/Twelfth and St Patrick's Day: it seems to be only those two events! Apart from that nobody really cares. But I think that for many young people who get involved in rioting it is often just done for the sheer craic.

My mum is married to a Protestant. My mum's opinion on it is that there is really no point in this religious divide, because everyone is the same, and 'Protestants' and 'Catholics' are just labels, and she doesn't want anything to do with sectarianism. She does love St. Patrick's Day, but to her there is nothing sectarian about it.

I don't take anything to do with our religious differences: everyone is the same to me; I have loads of Protestant friends. I just like people, I am a very friendly person! Some people make a big issue out of these differences, but I just don't care. I celebrate St Patrick's Day and I also celebrate the Twelfth! The way I see it, it's just a day of celebration, a day to get out and have fun; it's not really about going out to kill one another.

Before I came on to this programme I was doing nothing, literally. I had just been sitting about in the house. I was applying for jobs and stuff but wasn't getting anywhere. I just wasn't good at the interview stuff. I got kicked out of school in fifth year and then went to Oasis, and they got in touch with Natalie, and the programme sounded really good.

Going to 'uni', seeing what it was like to study and talking about sociology was really interesting, I loved it. Finding out about society and culture and policing, it was so interesting. And then going on the residentials and to Germany and stuff, I really enjoyed myself. You really learned so much from it. And at the start of it I didn't know what I wanted to do. Natalie asked me, "What do you think you want to do?" and I was: "I don't know." Originally I thought I wanted to be an airline cabin crew, because I would love to see the world. But then I was told that you can get to go to different places through youth work, and it's not only by yourself. You go with young people and you get to give them a good insight into so many things. And that sounds completely up my street, so now I would like to do youth work.

I would love to go to Australia. What I would like would be to do youth work and take my qualification with me and maybe do youth work there.

Whenever the programme started there was an emotional time when we each done what was called a 'life map', and we spoke about our hard times; we included everything in our lives which had been bad or painful. We also included good times; we included everything, from when we were born right up until where we were now. And everyone got to know about each other's life story. Nobody judged anyone, we just shared each other's stories and what they went through. Everyone in the room. It was so good. And we all ended up in tears; everyone was just crying for each other, because of how hard it had been for people, and how much the stories related to other stories. You don't realise how much what is going on in someone's life relates to your own life story, until you start sharing it. And it's like: I can

We each done what was called a 'life map', and we spoke about our hard times... And we all ended up in tears; everyone was just crying for each other.

relate to so much of that – never in a million years could I have realised that someone else was going through the exact same things. It actually makes you feel better in yourself. I think that’s what made us feel stronger together, the fact that we have all went through the same type of things. And that was probably the best group work we done, for it just brought us all closer.

Our group is like a wee family, so we are, that’s the best thing about it. When you first came into the group you felt so intimidated, and you were thinking: “Oh my God, are these people going to like me or not?” But we soon became like a wee family. We have always said that: we’re not just a group, we’re family.

What have I got out of the programme? Well, first of all, they have helped me choose the career path I want to go down. I was really glad about that for I have never had a clue. I have always been chopping and changing about what I wanted to do.

Jordanstown gave me a good insight into university life and whether it is something I would want to do. Now, I hated school; I would never have thought of going back to education without the experience we had up at Jordanstown. Sociology was something I found I really liked. When I got into it I said: I would love to do more of this; I could now see myself going to university and doing something like this. I thought that even if I didn’t do sociology I could go on and do youth work.

The programme has helped me deal with... I do tend to have a wee bit of a temper, so I do, and the staff have helped me with that. The staff are always there to help you if you have got problems. If you have problems going on at home they are there to talk to, to help guide you through it. My parents have seen a difference, especially temper-wise. I think it was the whole sitting about doing nothing, it just did my head in, I was always angry at myself, I was just becoming a wee bum. But when I actually started to do something, my mum said she could tell the difference in me. Going on this course has probably been one of the best things I have ever done – and for them as well! Got me out of their hair!

What else have I got out of this programme? Great friends, probably long-lasting friendships, I would say. There is so much I have got.

In our group discussions, people are extremely open. If someone has got something on their mind, and gives their honest opinion on it, regardless of how harsh it sounds to the others, we encourage them to express it, because they feel they need to. For instance, there was a policewoman who came in to speak to us,

In our group discussions, people are extremely open. If someone has got something on their mind, we encourage them to express it.

and not everyone in our group agrees with the police. And some of us asked very pointed questions of her, about why do police get away with doing certain things, and behaving certain ways towards young people. And at times you could see that she didn't know what to say in reply. And that discussion was very good; none of us felt afraid to ask difficult questions. We felt they were all fair questions, anyway.

Different people come in and give different talks. Like when someone came in and talked to us about dealing with conflict, and how people show different personal styles. There was the 'director', there was the 'compromiser', and the 'harmoniser' ... and we asked ourselves what we thought we each were. And some of us found these [categories] a perfect match! I mean, I would be like a 'director', meaning that when I would be in an argument I would tend to voice my opinions very strongly, and believe that only my points were valid! And those labels sum you up so accurately. Even with one small aspect you say to yourself: that's me! So some of the discussions we have had, and the people they have brought in to talk to us, helped you to be more aware of yourself.

I think this self-awareness helps change who you are. I thought to myself: well, if this is the way you are, you need to try and change that; because they did say that if you were a 'director'-type person you're not really going to get anywhere. Because if you think you are right all the time, that's not the way life goes, you're going to have to compromise with people. And then compromising too and ending up with a solution which will be to the benefit of both of you.

I have actually started doing it. Before, I would call myself a foghorn, I didn't know when to shut up or hold back. And once I was set off, I was off... But now, from I started the programme, doing the 'argument' workshop, looking at solutions to stop yourself from being like that, has really helped.

In Germany there was a wee bit of conflict between me and another girl in the group, and we had a fall-out, but everything got resolved. And I thought that was a very positive aspect, for that's not usually like me, for if someone falls out with me I tend to *really* fall out with them, I tend to hold on to things, I won't talk to them at all. But Phil and Natalie helped me through that, and the person I had the problem with and I are 'happy as Larry' now, we're talking away. And for me it isn't often that that would have happened before. So it's very good to look back on that and say to myself: you can do that, you can resolve problems with people and remain friends. It was just me and another girl, and it was all over something so simple. I didn't like continental food at all... I'm a very picky eater, I only eat English food so I do. And she thought I was being ungrateful, and I reacted. So it was all over

something so petty, but it escalated. But now we're both fine! And I'm so glad we were able to work through it. Now, while Natalie spoke to us about it, it was me myself who went to the other girl and we resolved it ourselves: 'We need to resolve this and move on, for it is only going to make things hard for the whole group if we hold this tension between us.' And I think that the very fact that we both could do that was because of what we had learnt on the programme. Their motto is basically 'open and honest', and we always go by that. And instead of going around slabbering about each other, we just go to the person themselves and sort it out like adults, instead of having a wee case of 'Chinese whispers': "She said this, she said that." Just get it all out into the open and get it over with – and that's it.

A pity our politicians couldn't learn from this. Anyway, don't even get me started about the politicians! I swear I could have a debate with them on so many things. That's why I really enjoyed sociology, that was so up my street. If I could stand outside Stormont I would protest about so many issues.

Stormont was brilliant. We went to watch a debate among the politicians. And some of them were actually at each other's throats! You don't realise just how aggressive they can be. This girl [MLA] was nearly hanging over the bench, shouting at the other side. And on the other side one [MLA] was going buck-mad back at her. It all looked so pathetic. You have this notion that politicians discuss things quietly and seek compromise; we never expected to see a shouting match. I mean, they were at each other's throats; they were giving it their all! Life would be so much easier if they heard each other's opinions out and then quietly worked towards a solution. I really feel that all our politicians could benefit from the type of group-work we have engaged in on this programme. To me they don't seem to know what the word 'compromise' means. I don't agree with a lot of the things our politicians say and do. I often look at what they do and ask: 'Why? That doesn't make any sense.'

I really feel that all our politicians could benefit from the type of group-work we have engaged in on this programme. To me they don't seem to know what the word 'compromise' means.

I think I have developed skills which I could use in youth work, definitely. I have picked up a lot from Phil and Natalie, from what they do and how they resolve things. They're good teachers and I think I have picked up a lot of things from them.

[Name three things which to you were significant about the programme]

The youth workers themselves – the staff.

The experience of university life; it isn't very often you actually get to do that. And getting to go to Germany. It was brilliant. For you get a good insight into another culture, another way of life. One of the reasons we went there was to compare the two cultures. Basically, here we have two sides, Catholic and Protestant. In Germany, because so many people had lived their lives in East Germany, when the two parts came together they had difficulties in reintegrating. And we thought that was a good comparison with our own problems.

We also looked at how the Germans had treated the Jews. When we went to Bergen-Belsen I cried my heart out. See the atmosphere.... Before the visit they tell you the history about what happened, but to actually go there and see all the pictures in the memorial galleries... you can actually see it all happening in your head as you're walking through it. And it just hits you, so it does. I was standing in the memorial and I just started crying, because I could feel how terrible it must have been, as if you were actually there. And you just feel so bad for the people that it happened to. And I just cried. It just hits you. The pictures were so detailed. It was horrible. The children's wee toys and the pictures of the wee kids. And there were photos of some of those who survived and they were just pure bone. And lying on the floor. And mountains of bodies, just piled up. It was sick to see. We all knew it would be a wee heartbreak but we never realised it would be so emotional. And it got to everybody; we were all affected. The group work in Germany was just perfect, it was amazing, so it was. Everything was done together, and everyone stuck together. And the group work regarding the conflict and stuff, it was good. We mainly do everything in a group, apart from the individual one-to-one sessions with the leaders.

Katrina

I come from Rathcoole, a loyalist community. I find it hard to describe it: I just came from there, so it's all I know. When I was a kid my mummy and daddy split up and we sort of moved about a bit. I was moved around from pillar to post: between my mummy and my daddy and my granny. So I was never really settled as a child, I was bounced about a lot. I got my own house about two years ago. I had been in a flat before, but I hated it with a passion. The man below me was able to tell me everything I done, and the woman beside me was an alcoholic and banged my door at three in the morning! So I moved back to Rathcoole. But two years ago I had a miscarriage, and I began to suffer really bad with depression and

anxiety. Didn't leave the house, didn't want to go out, didn't want to see people, just wanted to be on my own. Just cut myself off from everybody basically. My family was very supportive, so they were; they'd have brought me up dinners, took me to their house to get me away from my own place for a while. My relationship with the daddy of the baby broke down in October last year. I am now in a new relationship; the fella is brilliant so he is, does everything for me, he is fantastic.

My journey over the past few months has been fantastic. From sitting in the house and not going out anywhere, not socialising with people at all, cutting myself off from the world, and just sitting a nervous wreck in the house – and now I'm out, I'm moving about. I've been away to Germany and I absolutely loved it. It was a fantastic opportunity. I had previously been abroad with a youth club during my first year in school. They had taken me away on a cross-community programme to Canada. New Brunswick. I had stayed there for six weeks with a family; it was another awesome opportunity. And I am really looking forward to going away on our next residential to Poland.

I am all into my history, so the likes of Bergen-Belsen was a very good experience. You hear people talking about it, and you hear people saying that it's really eerie when you're there, but you can never put yourself into that position until you're actually there. It's very... it's emotional. It was another awesome opportunity. I really enjoyed going to Germany.

Through the group I have met loads of lovely people. They're all – the other young people and the staff – very supportive and very... they're there to help, you're never stuck for anybody to talk to when you need it, when you have a problem or something's wrong. No matter who it is you can just pick up the phone, and they'll arrange to meet up with you. They're brilliant, they're very supportive. So I've made some good friends on the course. Some of them are on the same wavelength, with regards to feeling depressed or having anxiety, and it's good to know that I'm not the only one suffering with it. 'Cause you sit in the house and you wallow and feel sorry for yourself. It's nice to know that there are people there for you.

Going on to this programme and actually leaving the house was a big, big step for me. I had to get the bus into town on my first day of the course, and I had really bad palpitations on the bus and my anxiety was so high. I thought: I can't do this! I was taking panic attacks and everything. Going from taking panic attacks on buses to being able to go out and walk down to the shop and back again without taking a panic attack is a big achievement for me. As I said earlier, before going on this programme I just locked myself in the house. If anybody wanted to see me they had to come to me.

My cousin is into community stuff and he had recommended that it would be good to go on the course, it would be good to get out and socialise again, and be around people again. My mummy also encouraged it. And my partner also encouraged me. Don't get me wrong, I still have my bad days, but I *am* getting there, slowly but surely. I am making an effort, I'm trying, and I'm pushing myself. I'm doing things that's out of my comfort zone. Before I had the miscarriage I would have done anything, and gone anywhere, and done things all on my own. I would have been away out all the time. My depression and anxiety attacks stemmed from the miscarriage. But my mummy and daddy splitting up and me being moved around so much affected me too. It still affects me even now but I'm trying to put it past me; I'm trying to get past them barriers, to where I'm not dwelling on them. But it's easier said than done sometimes. My mummy had also suffered two miscarriages before she had me; it took her nearly five years to have me, so my mummy gets where I'm coming from, she understands. And to me that's a comfort too. My mummy has been a massive help to me.

Don't get me wrong, I still have my bad days, but I am getting there, slowly but surely. I am making an effort, I'm doing things that's out of my comfort zone.

To me, whether you're a Catholic or a Protestant, you're still a person, you've still got feelings. Yes, you get bitterness on both sides. My daddy would be very bitter, so he would. My mummy, on the other hand, always brought me up to realise that you can get good and bad on both sides. My mummy does a lot of community work, and she would have brought me up to believe that Catholics are people just like me. It's whether you choose to be bitter, or choose to get on with other people, it's up to me what I do... And she was right: I've learned that you get good and bad on both sides. And I've also learned that people are people, and you can get genuine people, and it doesn't matter what culture they come from, or what background they come from, there are genuine people out there. I am an easy-going person: show me respect and I will respect you – it doesn't matter to me where you come from. I have always been like that. If I meet people who are bitter, I just say to them: well, that's your problem, if you have a problem with me being a Protestant, there's nothing I can do about that, that's your issue, that's something in your head – *you* fix it. That's how I see it. I'm not going to change for other people just because they have bitter feelings.

Anyway, I hardly notice that this group is cross-community, it has never been an issue; it is so easy to get on with everyone on it. When we are discussing things

like sectarianism, I can usually see both sides of the story. I can see why Protestants maybe get angry, and I can see why Catholics maybe get angry. I tend to not bring anything of a religious nature into it, I sort of keep everything neutral. I would rather discuss, not things like flags, but things where we all have common interests.

Being on this programme has helped me get out of the house and back into socialising with people. My goals at the moment are all personal. In terms of afterwards I don't know yet what I'm aiming for, but eventually I do want to go back to work and I do want to be successful. Over the years going through school all my teachers turned round to me and said, "You're never going to amount to anything." I

was always told I was never going to get any grades. But I'm good at working with my hands. I love sport, anything hands-on. Working with computers and all? – fantastic. But see as soon as you set paperwork down in front of me, I'm lost.

I proved all my teachers wrong. Even though I got told I would never amount to nothing... I left school with 1 C, 4 Ds, an E, an F and a G, and a Level II in my Occupational Studies. I went back to Tech and I studied and I worked hard, and got a Diploma in ICT Practitioners, which is building websites and designing websites. I then went on to Impact Training and I done Business Administration with them, and I am now sitting on a BTEC Diploma in Level II Business Administration. I got my Maths and my English with them, got other qualifications too, and they put me through courses while I was with them. I think I have done pretty well over a period of four years, leaving school and going to Tech. It's not like I'm sitting saying: well, I don't have any qualifications. You hear people saying they have no qualifications and that's why they can't get a job. At least when I am good and ready to get out there and get a job – or whatever it is I make my mind I would like to do – I have got qualifications there to show I can apply myself. I am stubborn, I'm pig-headed at times, and when I want something bad enough I'll keep going 'til I get it. So, at the minute I am trying to work on *me*, and trying to get back to where I used to be before I had the miscarriage.

At Jordantown I was a bundle of nerves. I was thinking: what if they put me through exams and all? I'm dyslectic in numbers and with words, so I was a bundle of nerves doing it. But it really wasn't that bad and I enjoyed it, I enjoyed doing the course.

I can usually see both sides of the story. I can see why Protestants maybe get angry, and I can see why Catholics maybe get angry. [But] I would rather discuss things where we all have common interests.

[Name three things which to you were significant about the programme]

Getting my... no, I'm *gaining* my confidence back again. That's one. It has helped me get out of the house again, and back socialising.

Two: Germany had a big impact on me, I loved it. In fact, I didn't want to come home from Germany, I wanted to stay there. Speaking to German people, the majority of them were polite, but more than that they seemed to have a positive outlook on life. Unlike here, where everybody constantly thinks negatively. Everything is so depressing here. Everyone looks to the bad things. People here – in both communities – all think that *they* are so hard done by. Whereas people I met in Germany were positive; they seem to want to make the most of what they've got. And this wasn't just people we met as part of the programme. We were once at a bowling alley, and as I'm a smoker I went outside for a smoke, and I got into conversation with members of a professional bowling team. And they made a real effort to speak to me; they didn't have to. And there were other experiences like that with German people.

Three: making new friends. I think after this programme is over that I will stay in touch with people. It has been a brilliant experience.

Courtney

I live in nationalist/republican area. I grew up a Catholic and went to chapel when I was younger. I went to a Catholic school, primary and secondary, and I never really knew what a Protestant was. Anything I heard about Protestants was getting passed down from my older peers, and so that is all you think. I lived near Rathcoole but people always said to me: "Stay away from there." Bawnmore and Rathcoole would always riot and stuff. That's all I seen. I didn't really understand what it was all about. It was only when I actually started to do some cross-community stuff that I realised that we were all the same, and that all the stereotyping and sectarianism is just stupid. I did my first cross-community when I was thirteen.

It wasn't my mummy and daddy that was teaching me sectarian stuff, it was older peers. My mummy is a youth worker so she would say, "Wise up; there's no difference." So I wasn't getting anything sectarian from my home, it was just that people in my community were telling you stuff, and it was only when you got older that you realised that it was all lies. "Them ones do this... them ones do that."

Many of my friends were into cross-community stuff at the same time as me, but one wee boy, when he would come back from an activity, his mates would say: “What are you doing over there with themuns!” But it never happened to me. Anyway, I challenge people. If anyone says anything to me I say, “Why not! What’s the difference? Why don’t *you* all try it?” And mostly they have nothing to say back.

I remember talking to a group of young people once – we were talking about the fleadh and festivals and stuff – and I was saying to them: “Why do you need bonfires?” And they were saying, “It’s something to do, because it’s boring and all.” I said, “Well, instead of making a bonfire, why not raise money throughout the year and have another wee festival?” I don’t like bonfires, I hate them. They just look awful. And putting stuff on top of them even makes it worse. When they put a Tricolour or a Union Jack on top, I just think: why? why do you need to do that? And I hate all the pollution that they cause. They’re so bad for the environment. So I started a petition in my area against having a bonfire. I went round my whole area. And when I talked to the older people, most of them said they hate bonfires. But the young ones *did* want them – and they were telling me to ‘wise up’ with my petition.

Until I came onto this programme I had never went away with people from different religions, so this is the first time. To be honest, I don’t really think about it [the religious divide]; sometimes I even forget that we are all from different backgrounds, because we get on so well. I think people get into it too much, into the past, but in my opinion it’s all really pointless.

I’ve always been able to talk to people, always able to voice my opinions. But I think this programme definitely improved my confidence a hundred percent. Because before I was mostly among my friends and I was not confident being with strangers, but now I can go anywhere and talk to people. This group went to Stormont and I got the opportunity to give a talk in front of loads of people. My talk in Stormont was about building mixed communities. I was saying it was a good idea not to be flying *any* flags in a mixed area. I know flags are supposed to be part of people’s traditions, but I think it’s best not to fly any if people are living together. I think that would be a good step for the future. I think it went down well. I didn’t realise I was doing a talk until near the last minute! They push you. Now, if you don’t really want to do it, they don’t insist. But I was so glad I did; I just got up and started talking to everyone.

And we’re talking every week in Jordanstown University and doing that with everyone. And knowing you have so much support gave me more confidence now. As I said, the programme has helped my confidence one hundred percent.

I didn’t really know what I wanted to do [in the future]. I done all my years of

school, lower sixth and upper sixth, and my 'A' levels. But, at the end of it, it wasn't actually the A-levels I wanted: I done Art and I applied to art colleges, and it turned out I don't even like Art any more! I only like it as a hobby. I didn't know what I wanted to do. So then I came on this course; I wanted to have a gap year and think about what I wanted to do. And having one-to-ones with Natalie I started to think about the future, and I want to go to uni and do Marine Biology. But I also want to be a youth leader now, because of this group. I was already interested in youth work because my mummy and my aunties are all in it.

I was talking to Natalie and there's another group that's coming in. We do this plan for the other group, and there was three people picked to do that, and I was one of the ones picked for a placement, to be a youth worker. I can't wait; it's brilliant to have that opportunity to go and do that. I think I could do it okay. We went in the other day and everyone [in the newly-started group] was sitting around all shy and I said, "Right, everyone, let's get up and we'll do some ice-breakers!" I love it. I used to wonder how my mummy did it – she is so confident and all, just talks to anyone. I just want to be like that. I love youth work now.

I am looking forward to Poland. We don't know what we'll be doing there, it's all a big surprise. Like Germany. I think we're going to Auschwitz.

In the hostels we stayed at in Germany there'd be loads of people. And we'd sit and chat with them. And there was Matteus; he took us everywhere. He taught us German words, and a bit of German history. We learned loads. We went to see where Hitler's bunker was. There's nothing there now, just a car-park with a wee play park beside it. I loved the whole trip.

There is so much more to life than constantly talking about the 'other side'. I want to travel, I want to see as much of the world as I can. I would love to see the Great Barrier Reef. I love the ocean, it's my favourite place. Sharks are my favourite. I was once in Jamaica with my granda and we went snorkelling, seeing all the wee fish, and there were these small sharks. And ever since then I just love sharks; I think they're gorgeous creatures. And they get such a bad reputation, but they don't deserve it.

[Name three things which to you were significant about the programme]

One of them happened in Germany, because there was a conflict that went on [within the group], but we all sat down and aired our opinions and that really changed things. And I got to see how to handle that type of situation, and I was

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able to play the role of mediator. I did get irritated at times! But you just calm down and sort it out on a one-to-one basis. And there's techniques in that as well which Natalie was showing us. And I think that was really good. Just seeing all that happen, and being in that situation. Now, that sounds like a negative, but it was a positive that came from a negative, because you learn from it. And the other girl and I are fine with each other now, because we have resolved it. I think that was really good.

Another significant one from this programme was just all the opportunities that you get, and the support: the leaders are always there for you, and they're always pushing you, even the group as well. Natalie and Phil and Chrissy are brilliant. They just keep pushing and pushing you to do more. I think having them as leaders has been really good. And the Stormont visit and going in talking to strangers, those opportunities I think are really good for everyone's confidence.

A third one would be just making new friends, 'cause they're all amazing. Every one of them. I love this group. And hearing people's stories. Because we done 'life maps', and it was so emotional. That was our first residential together and we had only known each other for a week. But see after we done 'life maps' it was as if we had known each other for ever! And everyone was crying, it was so emotional. I loved 'life maps', it was so amazing. Just getting to hear everyone's background story.

This programme has really changed my life, it really has. And there's so much that is inspiring about it. I don't even think you will be able to get that across in the booklet you're doing: you really have to experience it. It is amazing – definitely.

Kelsea

I am from South Africa and have been in Northern Ireland almost two years now. I lived in a very small community just outside of Durban; people didn't really socialise in the community, because it was dangerous and you didn't know who might be walking about – people just down the road from us had been mugged or shot. I went to a private school with 120 kids in it. And that's basically what my life evolved around: my friends were from the school, and the church was in the school – it was part of the school buildings, being a Christian school. That was all I knew, so that was 'normality' for me. Whereas I think people who come from here and go over there would go: whoa, how do you live! Because there are big fences around all the houses – but that's life there, everyone has a big fence.

Although some of my relations held very racist views, I went to a school with mixed races, different cultures, different backgrounds; some people had lots of money, some didn't. Indians, Coloured, Blacks, Whites, Afrikaans-speaking people, English-speaking people... And that opened my eyes to the fact that everyone was the same. Most private schools are like that. Government schools are pretty much majority black, 'cause a lot of the white people put their kids into the private schools, because it is safer and they have the money for it. My sister-in-law went to a government school and she said that you get held up with knives and stuff in the actual school, and there's nothing the teachers can do about it, because they do it to the teachers too. In this country if that happened it would make the news, but there it is just a daily occurrence.

I have always wanted to make a positive difference in the world. Even since I was two I wanted to make a difference in animals' lives, and as I've grown up I have seen what's happened in the world, and there's this thing inside of me that tells me that things can be so much better. And I have always been like that.

In South Africa there's lots of issues around rape. Kids have more chance of getting raped than learning to read and write. That's a statistic which came out a few years ago, and it has probably got worse by now. Fake taxi-drivers were picking kids up from school and mugging them and raping them while they were in the taxi, then they just throw them out and go and get another kid. And in my area they were warning kids not to take taxis and public transport because of that. I had never taken a taxi in my life in South Africa, my mum always picked me up in her car.

I have always wanted to make a positive difference in the world. There's this thing inside of me that tells me that things can be so much better.

At my school we used to pack 'rape crisis care kits', and send them to the police stations and courthouses. The kit contained a soft toy, a colouring book, a few clean clothes, soap and toiletries... just stuff to let the kids know that people care. The kids who were raped would be from three-years-old upwards. I would never walk by myself down the street. And the problem is getting worse and worse, and the economy is collapsing, so that's why we eventually left South Africa. We came to Northern Ireland because my dad is from here. He moved to South Africa when he was nineteen, met my mum, had a kid, and stayed thirty years.

Before I came on to this programme I was doing a crap job – door-to-door selling – I hated it, because many people hate people who come rapping on your door to get you to sign up for charities. I got a lot of negative things said to me, and met

some creepy people. I hated it. And I wasn't doing anything outside of that, because you would work to nine at night. And then a friend of my mum heard about this course and here I am. And I'm not in a crap job any more. I enjoy it a lot.

I think it is opening people's eyes up a lot, because I feel that a lot of young people who grow up in this country are very sheltered about what goes on in the world. In my particular school at least [in South Africa] the teachers would tell you about the negative things happening in the world, but they would also tell you: this is how *you* can make the change.

From my view the problems people here [in Northern Ireland] focus on aren't really problems. Compared to what is happening around the world there aren't many real problems happening in this country, people just need to get over it. People here focus on their own wee problems, not global problems, and can't see that most of their problems aren't real. That's what I like about this programme.

People here focus on their own wee problems, not global problems, and can't see that most of their problems aren't real.

It is opening young people's minds up to what is actually going on, helping them discover themselves, and also helping them to look to the future.

Going to Germany, for example, helped to show that people everywhere have similar but also different problems. The Catholic/Protestant thing here is an issue. But so is the race issue in South Africa. And we learnt about the Nazis and the Jews. It helped us to see that not only do other countries have their own problems, but often they are far, far worse.

On a personal level, the programme has definitely helped me in different ways. It has allowed me to learn more about Irish history. It has helped me gain a lot of confidence. Like, six months ago I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you; I wouldn't be able to do it, I would be full on freaking-out about it. Last week they recorded us for something, but before I wouldn't have been able to do that. I was a very shy, closed-off person. The programme has also helped me feel confident to put forward my own point of view, because before I would just go along with what other people were doing.

In this group people do listen to each other. Everyone is very open and honest about things. We have had a lot of discussion, like going in-depth about sectarianism and things like flags and bonfires... Everyone has different points of views on it, and everyone shares those points of view. And that's something which is established right at the very beginning: that everyone has a point of view. It might not be the same as yours, but it doesn't mean they're wrong. And afterwards

they have all learned something. Also, when I see the other group members being fixated with local issues I can often see a bigger picture and will express that to them. So I hope that my input – as an outsider – is useful to them also.

The programme has reinforced my own desire to want to make a change, and open people’s eyes. I know that I want to do something with animals or kids, for that is where you can make the greatest impact. As I said, from the age of two I was obsessed with animals. My brother and I would rescue injured birds, snakes, anything. I always wanted to work in an animal sanctuary, or at a vets. But I also have a passion for working with kids, so I don’t really know what I will do.

Most of my confidence has come from my experience on this programme. It has encouraged me to say openly things which I always had in my mind but was hesitant to express. I have always been a people-pleaser and would just agree with what people wanted from me, but now I have got the confidence to say: “No, that’s not what I want to do.” And that change has come pretty much from this course.

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I remember the first day; no-one would say a word, we were all just sitting there staring [at the floor]. No-one knew anyone, but the course was designed to bring you out of your shell. I mean, you’d start off with stupid ice-breaker games, that would make you feel completely stupid, but everyone is doing it so it helped in a weird way. And then having the different discussions and projects, and the university course... so it is definitely like as if every little thing put together helps you a great deal. I have seen people really come out of their shells.

My family see a big change in me. As I said, I have always been a people-pleaser, always worried about making people happy and doing what they wanted me to do. Whereas now, I’m saying: “No, I don’t want to do that,” and I will stand up for myself.

I think I can have a positive input into discussions about what people are concerned with here. People here are very fixated on *their* side of the story, and ‘this is what happened to *us*’, whether Protestants or Catholics. And to me looking in, it is stupid: you’re all people. It doesn’t make sense to me to pick sides, but people in Northern Ireland feel obligated to pick a side. Even my dad. I never heard my dad mention Catholics or Protestants the whole time we lived in South Africa – but he comes here and is a Protestant straight away! And I ask:

well, what does that mean? You're just a person, and everyone else is just a person. But I was like that in South Africa as well. Having relatives who were racist – I mean, *super*-racists – I have always been: it's got nothing to do with the colour of your skin, everyone is a person. People there would say: "They're black, that's why they rob me." Or: "They're white, that's why they act like that." Whereas to me it's to do with their character. I know a white guy who beat his grandmother to death over her will, and people said there was something wrong with him, mentally. Whereas if that had been a black person people would have said it was because he was black. So, looking in on the Catholic/Protestant issues here... flags and all the other issues we have here – which aren't actually issues... it's seems pointless to me.

I have met older people here who can talk about people from their community who died in some *generations ago*. People here cling to the past.

[Name three things which to you were significant about the programme]

Definitely meeting new people and being able to make friends. The way I see it I have made friends for life, I have come really close with everyone.

Another is the learning. Although I hate history you need to learn about the past so as not to repeat it. And I think that's one way people are going to get over the issues in this country. People need to say to themselves: this is what happened, this is the effects of it – and then ask themselves:

"Was it all worth it, all those lives lost?" Because people are still arguing today about the same issues they had before those lives were lost. So learning about history was definitely a good thing. Looking back I think it was probably one of the best parts of it.

And definitely the international trips. A lot of people who travel abroad normally go to the beaches, but on these trips we don't do that. You go there to learn about another country and its culture. I had one of the best times of my life in

Germany, and I am sure Poland will be the same. I had read about what happened in the concentration camps, but reading about it is quite different to being there. It definitely opened my eyes and made the things I had read about a lot more real, and that's why Germany was so good.

People need to say to themselves: this is what happened, this is the effects of it – and then ask themselves: "Was it all worth it, all those lives lost?" So learning about history was definitely a good thing.

Staff comments: Chrissy

I think it has been amazing to watch people's confidence levels grow, with Natalie and Phil and I supporting them and drawing out their potential. Everyone on the programme has come on by leaps and bounds. Sometimes I have found the change that has taken place to have been quite dramatic. When we're in an activity, or say when we went to Germany, there have been occasions when I have looked at them and said to myself: 'Woah, you have certainly come on!' Or sometimes wee things they say make you realise how much they've grown, and how positive they are now, compared to what it was like when they all first met as a group.

The programme has sort of grown organically. At the start we had a basic outline of the overall programme but once it commenced it was tailored more and more to the young people's need. So some of the actual planning originated with the group itself. Having said that, the German trip, for example, was planned by us in advance, because we wanted to build in an element of surprise and excitement. We did tell them, however, that we would be visiting Bergen-Belsen and warned them that they might find this traumatic. Also, our facilitator in Germany has developed a well-rounded programme, and to use someone like that means that you're going to make full and productive use of your time away.

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We feel that our programme, because it is so varied and intensive, offers a lot to the young people. The programme is planned so that the start, the middle and the ending are all equal parts of a focused approach to the young people's needs. We like to believe that the young people will feel they have achieved something by the end of it. What is really important is that the young people have another signpost at the end of the programme, in terms of employment, or back into education, or maybe on to another programme. I think another important element is the people who deliver the programme: their experiences, their abilities, and the planning that they put into it.

The hope is that this pamphlet will be an extra help to us. This is only a pilot project and although *we* know by talking to the young people how much it has changed them, it will be good to get their *own* honest impressions and opinions on what it means to them. Furthermore, I hope this pamphlet will help to highlight

the benefits of the programme. Because if it has changed their lives as much as they say – and I know personally that it has – then it would be good to see it helping to change other young people’s lives in the same way.

We are now entering the Employability portion of the programme. All the previous work on personal development will already have helped in making them more employable, but now we focus on placements. Natalie and I have sat down on a one-to-one basis with each of the young people and discussed what they were really interested in, even what they had a passion for. Each of them has their own likes and dislikes. For example, there’s one guy who loves motorbikes. He also owns a Vespa, goes to Vespa meetings and is in a Vespa group. He also goes to the Isle of Man to watch the races. So we are hoping to get him a placement either as a motorbike mechanic, or else working in go-karting, for he’s interested in that too.

One of the girls has always expressed an interest in animals and young people, but couldn’t choose. And there’s a vet near her, and we’re going to get her in there. And she said that she wanted to do veterinary studies in Tech, so we’re going to get her into that too. So, we try and find placements to suit their personal interests. We also try to find placements local to the young people; if not, we pay them their travel costs. These placements mean they are getting a taster in what they *think* they are interested in. They might find that they really *are* interested; on the other hand they might discover that it is not for them after all. But at least the taster placement gives them an opportunity to see for themselves.

It might encourage some of them to think: I don’t have to stay here, I can travel. Your life isn’t limited to Antrim or Newtownabbey, or even Ireland – life doesn’t stop there.

Also, it might encourage some of them to think: I don’t have to stay here, I can travel. There aren’t many jobs here, and the funding is hard to get, but you don’t have to stay in your own area, even your own country, you can travel. You life isn’t limited to Antrim or Newtownabbey, or even Ireland – life doesn’t stop there.

Staff comments: Natalie

It is hard to put into writing just how much of an honour it is to be the ‘Relentless Youth Worker’ on the United for Change programme. Being part of such a powerful youth work journey has filled me with so much pride for every single young person

who has taken part. From ‘day one’ it has been a whirlwind and it feels like just yesterday when we all met for the very first time: a time when the young people were filled with nerves, hopes and fears for what was to come. It didn’t take long for the laughs and conversations to start, and now lifelong friendships have been formed.

As my job-title would suggest it’s about not giving up. So many of the young people had spoken about previous experiences were “things hadn’t worked out” or they had been “let down”. I wanted to do my title justice and be the support for each individual young person that they truly deserved.

Many times my role is a listening ear, and showing the young people that I am there to help, to break down the barriers they had come up against so many times before. A young person said to me, “Nobody has ever been there so much for me. to help me.” That struck something within me: this programme is life-changing! Having the opportunity to work with the young people and watch them push boundaries, overcome fears and push their comfort zones is humbling but it has also been a real pleasure. To be part of this journey and to witness their confidence, self-belief and aspirations grow is powerful.

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Some of the young people never dreamed they could ever go to university, and to observe their faces while they were attending classes in the University of Ulster was one of the biggest highlights for me.

Germany was one of the best experiences of my life, personally and professionally, from Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, Berlin and its diversity, to the ‘high ropes’ course, and the many laughs and tears in between.

Currently we are in the employability stage of the programme, where the young people are excited about their own personal journey and what is to come. We are working hard to ensure that the young people are signposted into education, employment or training come April. This is a vital part of the process for me, so that the young people don’t feel like they are ‘back to square one’.

The young people engaged in many sessions focusing on community relations, citizenship, employability and personal and social development. I have witnessed dramatic changes: opinions and views changed, all the young people grew in confidence, and stereotypes were broken down. The United for Change programme will be a legacy that lives for a very long time in their own communities. Being part of this programme and working with the United for Change staff has been one of the best experiences of my life.

Staff comments: Phil

Basically this programme is about promoting change in four areas when working with young people: personal, peer, community and societal. The four key areas within United Youth are: Personal Development, Good Relations, Citizenship and Employability. Now, we use a youth work methodology, but this time we have linked it in with academia. Our programme was designed around a merging of formal and informal activities, and, observing how the young people have responded to the programme, we think there's been something magical about it all. We're very much into relationship-building, and helping the young people articulate their thoughts and feelings, and while they're engaged in that process they're also acquiring a lot of knowledge.

The key aspect of this programme is that it is youth-led. Those core group of twelve have also designed a programme for *another* group of twelve. At times they will come together to share their experiences and support each other.

It's all about keeping them on a journey, if you like, as opposed to being stuck in their own communities, not doing anything, and experiencing that apathy and hopelessness which exists within many young people, especially the belief that they're not going to be able to achieve anything.

Now, we have still to get fully into the Employability portion of the programme, but I feel that what they have gained so far is important enough to show the journey they have each been on. The focus on employability will be to see if we can get something in place for each of them, so that they are not just dropped at the end of the programme, something we want to avoid at all costs. Our focus will be to assist them to determine the direction they want to go – and that might be back into employment, or into training, or into education. So that when the programme ends, it has really only been a new *beginning* for them.

I have to finish by saying that I have had the pleasure of managing an unbelievable staff team. Natalie has been exceptional in her role and a pleasure to work with. She has truly demonstrated the 'relentless youth work approach' and has many strong skills and qualities to bring to any team, so we were very lucky to get this staff member on our team and a pleasure to manage. Chrissy was brought in as an apprentice

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throughout the programme. What a breath of fresh air she has been, and her ability to connect with young people her own age has been a transformational experience on many levels. Chrissy will be an amazing youth work practitioner as she begins her degree this year in Community Youth Work, and not only has it been a pleasure to work with her, we hope that this is only the beginning for her work at NIYF.

We were also lucky to secure two full-time final year Community Youth Work students from the University of Ulster at Jordanstown for the project, Conchuir MacSiacaais and Christopher White. They are currently working with the second group of participants and have been exceptional in their roles, and quite clearly the sector will be gaining two very skilled and highly-motivated practitioners in the future.

The staff at NIYF would like to thank the United Youth Team for all their help, support and guidance. They have been amazing in terms of supporting the United for Change programme and the workers at NIYF.

Finally, I would like to thank all the young people on the programme, for without them there wouldn't be a programme. The staff will tell you that they have been inspirational and to go on the journey with them has been not only a privilege but something quite special. They deserve all the credit and their own change has been remarkable and amazing to watch.



United for Change participants engaged in group work



For further information on the **United for Change** programme, contact

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