

Taking the plunge into all things Irish

By Ray O'Hanlon

For generations of Irish school kids it was a rite of passage into a deeper appreciation of their Irishness.

The summer holidays would arrive, the bag would be packed, and it was off to Irish school in the Gaeltacht.

The idea was that by living with a family that spoke Irish morning noon and night the student - who studied Irish in school - but typically had little involvement with the language beyond it - would crack the linguistic code and arrive back home spouting a lot more than the *cupla focal*.

In some cases it worked, in some it did not.

But it's rare indeed to find someone who attended Irish school who failed to come away from the experience with an enhanced sense, to some degree, of being, well, Irish.

The Bean an Tí, whoever she

was, invariably had an effect.

The Irish government recently strove to have an effect on young minds when it introduced what it called a summer camp program aimed at young Irish Americans 15 to 17 years old.

In November, 2015, then Minister for the Diaspora, Jimmy Deenihan, announced that the program would be primarily educational in nature and designed to encourage students "to develop a deeper connection with Ireland."

Summer camp program participants, said Deenihan, would have the opportunity to travel to visit rural and urban areas, to learn about the country's history and to experience the modern face of Ireland.

The program, said Deenihan, would be initially run as a pilot phase.

He compared it to the "birthright" program that has seen hundreds of thousands of



Brian Fahy and Dr. Johanna Clancy, directors of the Celtic Irish American Academy with Minister for the Diaspora, Joe McHugh, at the recent Global Irish Civic Forum in Dublin.

young Jewish Americans visit Israel.

Pilot or not, the Irish version didn't get far off the ground

and, after twenty American students took part in July, 2016, the program was cancelled for this summer of 2017.

It was, said a government statement, "under review."

All is not lost, however.

There are still ways that young Irish Americans can spend summer days connecting with their Irishness, inner or otherwise.

And one of those ways is signing on to the program offered by the Galway-based Celtic Irish American Academy.

The CIAA is the brainchild of Brian Fahy, a secondary teacher based in Salthill, just outside Galway City, and his daughter, Dr. Johanna Clancy, a lecturer at NUI Galway.

As the first and, thus far, only group of Irish American students was immersing itself in Ireland last summer in the government-run program, another group was doing much the same thing in the CIAA's inaugural summer camp.

Brian Fahy, on a recent visit to New York, explained that he has many relatives in the U.S. and has spent a good deal of time in the United States over the last thirty years.

"I could sense that there was an ever increasing need to revitalize and reinvigorate the bonds between the U.S. and Ireland," Fahy told the Echo.

A certain distance, or chasm, was developing, he said, this probably due to the tailing off of immigration from Ireland.

The best way to stop this from happening, he believes, is through working with young people and helping them engage with their ancestral homeland by way of actually visiting in it.

"Our aim is to engage high school students in an intellectu-

ally stimulating and deeply enriching exploration of their Irish heritage," said Fahy.

And he continued: "I really believe that to fully appreciate your Irish heritage, you must come and explore it at a young age. Hence, we provide a totally immersive program.

"To date, it has been left to the older generation to pass on the virtues of what it is to be of Irish descent. To embrace our history we must look to the future.

"The old Irish saying of *mol an oige agus tiocfaidh siad* holds true here, that being praise and nurture the youth and they will come good.

"We are now providing a great opportunity for the young to live and learn in a secure environment while residing with a traditional Irish family.

"It is a great chance for high school students to develop as global citizens, and of course to enhance their resume through the volunteering, leadership and business elements of our program as well as gaining a deep appreciation of their culture and heritage."

The immersion not only involves living with a host family, but also attending classes in a range of subjects at St. Enda's College in Salthill - where Brian Fahy is assistant principal - going on guided tours and walks, learning about Gaelic games, Irish dance and music.

Tours include an exploration of Connemara and parts of the Wild Atlantic Way, opportunities to horse ride and windsurf, visits to popular destinations such as Kylemore Abbey and the Spiddal Craft Village, attending a lecture at the National University of Ireland Galway, and indeed learning more of the Ireland/U.S. connection by visiting a U.S. multinational company.

A highlight of the fortnight is a full day excursion to the Aran Islands.

Not all activities are in County Galway.

There is a day trip to County Clare that includes a stop at the Cliffs of Moher, and there is another day spent in Dublin with visits to some of the Irish capital's many delights.

If the program is enjoyed by the participant, if the West of Ireland works its magic, the idea is that the American student feels that he or she is living for the two weeks in a home from home.

An Irish home.

This year's academy runs July 15 to the 28th. More at www.CelticIrishAmericanAcademy.com

On 15 and 16 June, 2017 the eighth annual New York-New Belfast conference will take place at Pier A Harbour House, NY. The conference will highlight the bridges of progress and prosperity being built between the citizens of the two great cities of New York and Belfast, looking optimistically to the future while celebrating our shared past. A Belfast delegation of community, cultural and business leaders will meet with their New York counterparts to discuss investment, embedding the peace, tourism, the arts and how they can work together to the mutual benefit of their communities.

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Professor Raffaella Follì, Head of School of Communication & Provost Ulster University Belfast



Michael Sorkin, Author 'Twenty Minutes in Manhattan', New York



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