Tightening transatlantic

Academy gives US highschoolers a masterclass in leadership and Irish heritage

▲ Mayor Eddie Hoare and Programme Directors Brian Fahy and Dr Johanna Clancy with students from the Celtic Irish American Academy during a visit to City Hall last month.

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IMAGINE getting the opportunity as a teenager to spend a fortnight in Galway during its international arts festival, staying with host families and being bussed around to some of the best tourist attractions in the region.

Well, that's exactly what 30 American high school teenagers experienced as students of the Celtic Irish American Academy, which offers a unique opportunity for young people to find out more about their Irish heritage.

What started as an idea between a Salthill father and daughter seven years ago has quickly grown into a much sought after summer camp for Americans, particularly those with Irish links.

The brainchild of Brian Fahy and his daughter Johanna, the Academy had 30 students this year, compared to just six in its first year. There is little doubt that word is spreading among the best schools in the US and the City of the Tribes could be hosting this annual educational and adventurous event for many years to come.

Brian, a retired teacher of English and History at St Enda's College in Salthill, is delighted with the success of this year's Academy, the result of a number of trips to the US to visit schools to muster up interest – the programme was launched in Manhattan in 2016.

Undoubtedly, the pandemic put a halt to the Academy's summer schedules for two years, but this week, Brian and Johanna acknowledged that they could finally see the fruits of their labours over the past seven years.

The pair have put the work in not only reaching out to high schools in the US, but in the meticulous preparation of the Academy's two-week programme which includes classes in Literature, Irish, History, on global citizenship and sustainable development goals, youth leadership and empowerment as well as an interactive class this year in traditional Irish crafts. Almost all of these classes involve specialist guest speakers and coaches.

From a strong sporting family, Brian stresses that sport is also included, with instruction in hurling and football. In fact, one of the students in this year's programme showed a natural flair for hurling, probably due to her being a lacrosse player at her own school back home in the States.

But the programme doesn't just centre on classes, it involves walking tours around the city, day trips to Conamara, the Burren and Dublin this year. And this year there was a STEM visit to Medtronic to see a global medical technology at work.

But the father-and-daughter team are equally thrilled at the connections being made by these young people to Ireland, greatly helped by the group of dedicated host families who welcome the students into their homes. For convenience sake, all of the homes are in the Salthill/Knocknacarra area.

"Some students stay in touch with their host families and some make friends with other students – some organise reunions with their co-students when they get home. But not all of the students have Irish connections and that's fine, as one of our main goals is to promote global citizenship and leadership," says Brian, who has no doubt that these students will be returning as adults. In previous years, friendships have been forged between host families and the students with Irish teenagers visiting the American families.

bonds through learning

▲ Brian Fahy of the Celtic Irish American Academy with his grandson, John Connolly (18), a Programme Leader at the summer school.
PHOTO: JOE O'SHAUGHNESSY.

Johanna, who is a lecturer in social business at the University of Galway, explains that she and her father had been inspired to start their Celtic Academy after their trips to the US to visit family.

"I had brothers and uncles in the US and they had families and we could see that the connection between the younger generation and their Irish heritage was loosening. That's when we thought we could do something to address that but as the programme has developed, it has evolved into a more global outlook. By default, the Irish culture aspects have come through to strengthen the very links we had hoped to bolster from the start," she said.

As the Academy - which takes place to coincide with the Galway International Arts Festival in the last two weeks of July - gained momentum, some like-minded people in the US offered scholarships. One of these is from two-time Nobel Prize nominee, Denis Mulcahy, who sent ten students to the programme this year alone. His Project Children initiative is the subject of the documentary film, 'How to Diffuse a Bomb: The Project Children Story' narrated by Liam Neeson. That project, established in 1975, has brought 20,000 Catholic and Protestant children to suburban US for summer long visits where they forged unexpected friendships with one another breaking religious barriers that had existed for decades.

Other US based people highly supportive of the Celtic Academy are Florida based, Michael and Marlene Gaffney, the Shea family in Chicago and Una Teresa Gormley in New York, where she's involved in the Irish American Young Leaders. Another is Boston based Moycullen native, John Flaherty.

This October, Brian will fly to the US to visit a few more schools on the East coast. "Since we started this, we have found that there's nothing like the personal touch, that meeting people face to face to tell them about the Academy is the best way of promoting what we do.

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"There's a huge emphasis on prepping for college in the US, not as much here. These high school children attend various summer camps to do that and coming to our Academy fits the bill. That experience starts as soon as they meet their host families who look after them as if they were part of their own family.

"This year, the students, aged 15, 16 and 17 loved diving into the sea at Blackrock, they loved the walkability of the city and of course really enjoyed visiting the various art exhibitions during the Arts Festival. And they thought the Silent Disco was the best fun they've ever had.

"Every year we hook up with a local charity and ensure that our students do some voluntary work. It was Foróige (the national youth organisation) this summer and as well as doing a voluntary hike up Diamond Hill in Conamara, we did a clean-up in Salthill Park and at Blackrock Beach."

This year, the students met the Mayor of Galway, Cllr Eddie Hoare at City Hall, where he challenged them on a number of topical issues, such as climate change. That was one of the highlights too, particularly for the few parents who had decided to visit Galway and see their children, not to mention hearing the Mayor describing the students as "future leaders".

The ethos of the Academy is to encourage leadership, to open the students' eyes to global issues and sustainability.

As Johanna says, the programme has evolved from having an American-Irish premise to a broader horizon, something both daughter and father has welcomed and embraced.

The Fahys may not know what the future holds, but they do know that every year they are growing their American links and are gaining more experience and as long as they are enjoying it, the Academy will endure and continue to flourish.