

Peaceful holiday

Irish kids get respite from strife

By M.B. Dillon
staff writer

One minute, Paul Casey, an 8-year-old from Belfast, Northern Ireland, was clowning around with his friends, posing for a photographer on the front lawn of his American host family's home.

The next minute, Paul, long lashes framing his large green eyes, was in a more serious mood. He was sitting by the driveway, talking about what he likes and dislikes about the United States and Northern Ireland.

"The food here is kind of different. It's good," said Paul, a few hours before he and his brother Kevin, 6, ended their recent six-week stay in the United States.

"The only thing I like about living in Ireland is when my mom takes us to the beach."

"The thing I don't like is when the Brits are around," Paul said, folded arms resting on his blue jeans, eyes focused straight ahead.

"They break into the houses. They shot Daddy. It happened in my house."

Paul and his brother, a chaperone and three other children were sponsored by families from Wayne, Oakland and Livingston counties through a program called Irish Political Prisoners' Children's Holidays.

Among those who donated airfare and expenses were Daniel and Gerlie O'Kennedy of Livonia and Michael and Barbara Sullivan of Farmington Hills. This marked the first time Michigan participated in the program.

Like Kevin and Paul, the other youngsters have parents who've been involved in the ongoing struggle in Northern Ireland.

Kelly Skolarus, 18, and her parents Ed and Polly of Livingston County, hosted Kathleen Murray, 13, of West Belfast. Murray's father has been in prison for 11 years.

Said Kelly Skolarus, "We went out a lot with my friends — they really liked Kathleen. They called her 'Miss Ireland.'"

"We took her out to eat, and to Bahama Mamas in Taylor. We had a great time dancing."

Kelly said what Kathy told her

All the youngsters brought to the area have parents who have been involved in the ongoing struggle in Northern Ireland.

about Northern Ireland "sounds like the Russian government. There are soldiers on the streets. Some are nice, but some can be really mean. They yell and swear at people. I don't believe things till I'm right there. But now I understand better."

KATHY, WHO has blue eyes and long, wavy strawberry blonde hair, said she's going to miss her new friends and "going to the beach." She's looking forward to Irish food, and "playing soccer and hurling with my brothers and friends."

What she dreads about going home is "just all the British soldiers shooting and fighting all the time, and just the feeling of people dying."

"Ever since I was little, two or three times every year, the soldiers have raided our house. It's scary. They come really early, at 1 or 3 in the morning. They kick the door. If no one answers, they try and kick it in."

"They have guns and dogs and they get everyone downstairs, and search the house. They look under the carpet, and look in the attic. They wreck the house looking for guns and bombs. They've never found any."

"If all the British soldiers were put out of Ireland, there would be no more trouble over there," she said. "If the British don't leave, there will just be sadness. It will always be the same."

HOST FAMILIES and folks ranging from the manager at Meijer to Detroit Tigers owner Tom Monaghan did what they could to help the children forget about their

war-torn country for a while.

"The manager at Meijer's gave toys to Kevin and Paul," said Pat Ranger of Brighton, who with her husband Ray organized the trip and hosted three of the young visitors.

"People said Tom Monaghan would never do anything, but he sent the kids Tigers yearbooks and key chains. We had a lot of neighbors and friends donate clothing, toys and money."

"The children are all going home with new shoes, jeans, shirts and toys," she added.

The Matthews family of Howell hosted Rossa Quigley, who celebrated his 12th birthday during his visit.

"Rossa had never had a birthday party, and Anne (Matthews) gave him one," said Ranger. "They hired a magician, and had balloons, favors and crepe paper decorations, and served dinner to 25 kids. The kids wore birthday hats. Rossa may have thought that was kind of dorky, but he's going home with a birthday party under his belt."

Chaperone Rosie Murray, whose husband and brothers have been political prisoners, enjoyed a welcome respite as well. The top of Ranger's garage served as her sun deck, and Meijer as her second home. Just hours before the Irish entourage was about to leave, she was still shopping for clothes for family and friends.

Ranger hopes that next year more children and wives of political prisoners can visit the United States. Anyone interested in information, or in contributing to next year's exchange trip, can write P.O. Box 24744, Detroit, 48224.



SCOTT PIPER/photographer

Paul Casey (left), Rossa Quigley, Kathy Murray, land took part in an exchange program with: Kevin Casey and Ciaran Quinn of Northern Ireland families this summer.

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