

## **Trinity College Students Acquire New Skills To Help Understand The Past**

A new programme of oral history training has begun to help local communities in border areas tell the stories of their past and sometimes troubled histories.

The oral history training is being offered as part of the Peace Process: Layers of Meaning Project; an ambitious collaboration between Queen Mary, University of London, Trinity College Dublin, and Dundalk Institute of Technology. The programme is supported with €1.1 million from the EU's PEACE III programme.

Trinity graduate students in history, law and sociology are enrolled in this programme, together with a truly diverse range of community leaders from Northern Ireland and the border counties. Three LLM students - Alex Layden, Christina O'Byrne and Beatrice Vance - are part of a group of forty-five participants, twenty-seven of whom flew to Queen Mary College, University of London, last week to undertake four days of specialist training.

Located in the heart of multi-cultural East London, Queen Mary provided the idea base from which to explore communities in conflict and to learn from oral history projects that have been undertaken with a wide range of ethnic groups. Field trips included a visit to the Imperial War Museum and to Toynbee Hall, a world-renowned pioneer in the identification and resolution of community stresses and conflicts.

Alex Layden explained why he got involved in the project:

“Oral history opens a window into the human side of past events. It engages the listener in a personal way and provides the public with a record of history seen through the eyes of those who were there.” He hopes that the skills acquired will be a valuable tool in future research into post-conflict societies and added: ‘Hopefully a greater dialogue will develop within TCD which promotes the benefits of oral history’.

Christine added that the programme had underscored to her the value of oral testimonies. She feels that ‘living history can have a much great impact, emotionally and intellectually’. She added that she will now ‘have a greater interest in listening to members of my own family and community and in learning of times gone by.’ Highlighting the transferability of the skills she gained she stated: ‘I will try and incorporate more oral history testimonies into further research I conduct, rather than relying on simple written case law - facts and evidence.’

Beatrice Vance is already planning how she would use her skills, saying:

“While in London I have been thinking about Irish history and that the Irish nuns could be extremely interesting in relation to why they became nuns - the educational roles they undertook and the Magdalene laundries, although it is a sensitive issue.”

Further training will take place at Altnaveigh House in Newry and at Dundalk Institute of Technology. The programme aims to equip teachers, students and community leaders with the skills and knowledge to carry out their own oral history projects; recording the recollections and stories about their communities, their shared and divided pasts, and the steps taken by local people towards peace and reconciliation.

The Programme Director, Dr Anna Bryson, from the Centre for Contemporary Irish History, Trinity College Dublin, explained:

“The aim of the training programme is to demystify the academic process involved in oral history and social enquiry interviewing. We want to equip community leaders and students, interested or already involved in oral history projects, with the necessary skills and self-confidence to engage with the past in a professional and ethical manner. In the spirit of the settlement movement this course demonstrates the immense value of combining academic research with community engagement. It provides an opportunity for our students to work alongside those who have been deeply affected by conflict and to consider new approaches to cross-community research.”

The training programme will act as the foundation for three border-region oral history projects due to be announced shortly. The project is also in the process of collecting and archiving one hundred ‘heritage interviews’ with senior political figures, civil servants, and community and religious leaders involved in attempts to achieve peace over the last forty years. The project is described in full at: [www.peaceprocesshistory.org](http://www.peaceprocesshistory.org).

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