

Sweet song

Georgia has been on the minds of some young people from Belfast and Dublin.

Angila Chada explains why and how.

Springboard works with young adults from disadvantaged communities in Belfast and Dublin. Our twin aims are to promote mutual understanding amongst young adults from different traditions and to enhance employability.

Funded through the International Fund for Ireland's Wider Horizons initiative, Springboard's international programmes have a three-stage structure: an overseas work and independent living experience is sandwiched between two full-time learning programmes.

Preparation

Young people are recruited mainly through word of mouth or via youth and community agencies in both cities. In Belfast, we ensure that recruits come from both traditions, as cross-cultural communication is central to what we do.

After an initial interview, an eight-week initial training is held in Belfast, with the young people from Dublin coming staying

during the week and travelling home at weekends. The content will vary according to the group and the destination, but there tends to be four main threads:

- Professional training: participants have an opportunity to work towards formal **vocational** qualifications;
- Personal and social education: awareness around such issues as drugs, alcohol and sexuality;
- Mutual understanding and **diversity**: exploring different cultures, often linked to the cultures) of their overseas destination;
- **Team development and group** work: learning to work together to achieve.

Cultural insights

As a sample of our Wider Horizons work in 2006, 18 young people went to Atlanta, Georgia. They worked as 'interns' in Atlanta companies, organisations and government agencies for eight-weeks.

Springboard set up the trip through a partnership with the Fulton Atlanta Community Action Authority (FACAA), which provides job-training opportunities to low-income Atlantans. Atlanta's history with the civil rights movement and present cultural diversity were reasons for choosing the city as a destination for our trainees.

As well as job training, we organised opportunities for the young people to learn; about the Civil Rights movement and Atlanta's place in its past, present and future. This fitted in perfectly with our overall goal of promoting cross-cultural cooperation and understanding on a personal level.

The group visited the Martin Luther King National Historic Site, an African American educational institution, whose history dates back to the years following the civil war, and Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Martin Luther King Jr. pastored in the 1960s.

The Youth Ensemble of Atlanta (YEA), an African American youth training theatre company, demonstrated the power of music, dance and drama, as a means of empowerment. The trainees also took part in an interactive symposium to explore the differences and similar challenges facing youth in the US and abroad.

One of the greatest benefits to the trainees came from living with host families during their stay. This gave them the chance to gain a real understanding of Atlantan life from the inside. We are now working to organise a reciprocal visit from young Atlantans.

Back home

On their return, the young people spend a further three weeks reviewing their international experience and building their action plans for the future. The feedback from young people has illustrated the massive learning opportunities the programme provides.

The Springboard experience is a powerfully diverse one - unlike their young people's experience of life so far, where few will have left their 'mono-cultural' communities. With Springboard, they have to meet and work with people from **other** cultures. In the places they visit, they also see different communities relating and working together, which forces them to ask questions about their own lives back home.

However, if there is one area where we see major change amongst the young people, it is in the growth in confidence resulting from their independent living experience. They have been able to learn to live in another country - a massive confidence boost, if ever there was one!

Angila Chada is Executive Director of Springboard.