

Creative Extremists in Action

'So the question is not whether we will be extremists but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?' Martin Luther King Jr, Letter from Birmingham Jail, 1963.

Martin Luther King tells us that he was initially disappointed at being categorised as an extremist. It is true that our reaction to words and what they convey to us can be very subjective; the Volunteer Development Agency in 2001, the International Year of the Volunteer, published a book entitled 'Stories from the Edge' describing the experience of a number of volunteers and their contribution to society in Northern Ireland. One of these stories was about Hugh, a volunteer from Co –Armagh who in the 1970s found himself organiser of a group of vigilantes. Then and now the word has connotations of an extreme group that seek to hand out their own form of justice. However in the town where Hugh lived 'vigilante' was the name given to a local community watch whose task was to act as an early warning against car bombs and assassins. For one year Hugh was a local vigilante co-ordinator and felt that this led him and a few others to setting up a local residents group that eventually evolved into a community association. By the mid 1970s the volunteers on the community association were pushing for a general clean up and improvements in their local environment. They also sought to maintain a mixed community and to minimise the polarisation of their area into Protestant and Catholic.

This conference encourages and challenges us to look again at volunteering and its relationship to meeting need and affecting change.

I want to stay with the 1970s theme because in the last few months I have been involved with VSB in another project associated with their 40th year celebration, a publication of interviews 'volunteer voices' spanning four decades. I was one of the individuals interviewed about my experience as a volunteer on a VSB summer scheme in 1974; one of the young people involved as a participant on the scheme was interviewed with me and this brought back many memories of a special experience. The summer scheme was based in the Lower Ormeau Road in Belfast, I remember vividly gaining entry to a blocked up house to use as a playhouse for the summer. Last evening I had a brief conversation with Gerard Rice, a community worker from LORAG, and mentioned my 1974 experience; he lived in the area at the time and remembered how rolls of wallpaper were rolled out along the street for children to paint on. I don't have my hair in pig tails any longer and have long since given up on wearing faded blue denim dungarees. However the experience challenged personal perceptions and extended boundaries of understanding and knowledge about myself, Northern Ireland and how communities work. It was and remains for me some 35 years later a defining moment when the community association committee at the end of the six weeks asked if I and the other volunteer would come back the following year. I didn't go back the following summer but I never lost the volunteering habit.

The first 'peace wall' in Belfast went up in the early 1970s – characterised by 30 foot high walls and corrugated iron barriers erected between neighbours to protect them

from each other. The walls still exist and yesterday morning Radio 4 ran a story about the wall in Cupar Street, situated off the Shankhill Road in North Belfast; a community where I also volunteered during the 1970s in a local Methodist Church Youth Club. I have known Jackie Redpath, a local community activist, since that time and it was Jackie who was interviewed on the radio about the wall now being covered by art work depicting scenes about the social history of the area. He referred to the creative and constructive energy that had led to the colourful face lift for the wall; emphasising this is the kind of energy that will eventually lead to the walls being no more.

The invisible thread that links these cameo stories with the stories of Loughview Community Partnership and the Ripple project and takes us right back to Martin Luther King's 'creative extremists' is people being motivated by wanting to improve things. Creative extremists are passionate about people, about justice, about a cause, about their community. This kind of passion has the power to change lives, societies, even history – no Barack Obama as President, no Northern Ireland peace process without individual and collective action in voluntary activities to promote, enhance, facilitate and develop a common concern for the well being of others that embraces difference and fosters a shared sense of responsibility to help others and to seek change.

A few years ago the Volunteer Development Agency ran a volunteer marketing campaign known as the 'would you campaign' the posters had the 'would you' and then a picture of the activity. The marketing company came up with the picture of decorating materials such as paint and paint strippers and thought a catchy caption might be 'would you strip for a stranger' – gives a whole new meaning to a home decorating service. We didn't go for this in case members of the public might take offence. However we do need to find creative ways to raise the profile of volunteering, what it can do for you, what it can do for your community and how to get involved.

Research into volunteering in Northern Ireland shows that volunteer numbers are at best static so I think it is vital that we all get a little more passionate about volunteering lest we lose the 'glue' that David Blunkett MP refers to as holding society together. So I want to encourage us all to make some practical volunteering commitments; starting with the following five point plan.

- If you are a volunteer involving organisations commit now to creating 10 new volunteer opportunities over the next twelve months.
- If you are a volunteer commit now to asking 10 people you know who don't volunteer to get involved; you might try the line 'would you share a little passion with a stranger!'
- If you are a politician commit now to supporting the new volunteering strategy and resourcing its implementation.
- If you are a local authority commit now to putting in place and implementing a volunteer policy and taking action on the new volunteering strategy
- If you are an employer commit now to signing up for VSB's next ESV event – 3rd June 2009.

This conference has been initiated by VSB an organisation that for over 40 years has understood the value of volunteering, has encouraged and enabled people(including myself) from across this great city and from all age groups and walks of life to actively participate in making a difference. In that spirit I would ask you to join with me in giving a resounding round of applause in recognition of all the creative extremists in Northern Ireland past, present and future fighting for the common good.

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