



Divided city: the New Lodge flats in north Belfast (left) and a mural in Tiger's Bay

A TRIP INTO THE FUTURE

As the 2010 North Belfast Respect Programme gets into full swing with bus tours this weekend, Paul O'Neill tells **Marie Foy** the remarkable story of an unexpected link between our segregated societies

Paul O'Neill is a community development worker with the Ashton Centre, one of the many groups doing invaluable work to heal the very deep wounds between the two rival communities which make up north Belfast.

Part of his remit is to set up good relations schemes to develop mutual understanding between the Protestant and Catholic communities. And one way this is happening is through the Bridge of Hope's (BoH) conflict research project Making Sense of the Past in the Present.

BoH, a project of the Ashton Centre, is currently rolling out a unique series of history tours, where nationalists and loyalists visit each other's areas — something that has been impossible during the Troubles and the following years.

This innovative conflict research project came about as a result of discussions between the BoH, based in the Catholic New Lodge area, and Mount Vernon Community House, in a Protestant area off the Shore Road.

"Even during the peace process, Catholics would have been afraid to go into Mount Vernon and Tiger's Bay, and Protestants into New Lodge," explains Paul. "Some people had never been in New Lodge before, just walked or driven past. And it was the first time that people from New Lodge had been to Mount Vernon.

"There was still a lot of interface rioting, Orange parade issues. Some people were killed and injured. There was still a lot of fear and mutual mistrust. We still live in segregated communities, with so-called peace walls separating people."

The rioting in Ardoyne in July underlines the unease some people still feel.

"The idea of this project was to bring people together from each community, people who had lost relatives as a result of the conflict, residents, ex-prisoners, groups reflecting the communities they came from," he said. "We invited people from loyalist areas to come into nationalist areas, and vice versa. On each tour we had 10 people from each side of the divide. "A lot of preparatory work was



Working together: Mount Vernon community worker Billy Hutchinson and community worker Mary Kelly cross the peace line at the launch of the North Belfast Respect Programme. Below left, a new mural. Bottom right, community worker Paul O'Neill



history tour dates:

- Tiger's Bay/New Lodge, tomorrow
- Mount Vernon/New Lodge, October 16
- Dublin, taking in the British War Memorial and Arbour Hill, October 17
- Stormont, October 20
- Wicklow, taking in Wicklow Gaol, Glasnevin Cemetery and Kilmainham Gaol, October 23



done and the guided tours were very structured and well-organised. We understood some of these people had lost family and friends and this could be sensitive for them. We had to be sure people were prepared to engage.

"In New Lodge we brought our guests to various sites where people had died, to community centres and other facilities. They could see some of the very good work going on there.

"The idea is to get to know each other's communities, to find out what it was like growing up there,

what made people adopt the attitudes towards the police, the state and the Army that they had, and to explain why they acted in the way they did. And to point out the similarities," says Paul.

"After the tour, we had a discussion about the many social and economic issues — housing, poverty, lower educational achievement, social disconnection, anti-social behaviour — which are the same in both areas — in an attempt to build trust and understanding. People may be different in terms of historical and political alle-

giances, but in many other ways they are the same.

"This was done in workshop form and a DVD was made with the permission of the participants."

During one visit, Paul tells how residents from Tiger's Bay were taken to a memorial in New Lodge inscribed with the names of more than 100 civilians and IRA volunteers who died as a result of the conflict.

"Our visitors were quite taken aback by the number of people who had died.

"It isn't a big area and the im-

pact on families was huge," says Paul. "Then they told us there were six people from Tiger's Bay who had a relative whose name was on the memorial — six people killed, mostly by loyalists, each with a loyalist or unionist background.

"That was something people in the New Lodge found very surprising. Strange but true."

This probably happened because couples in mixed marriages were separated from their families at the height of the Troubles and grew apart.

"The fact that these names were on the memorial, points up the whole interconnection which is there that many people don't know about."

In turn, the New Lodge group visited significant sites in Tiger's Bay, including a British Army memorial.

"It has taken society more than 20 years for people to feel they can discuss things. We have moved it beyond discussion by inviting people and making them feel welcome, treating them with respect, and being able to speak in an open, honest, but sensitive way," says Paul.

"The feedback from those who took part was very positive. Some people were nervous, but afterwards everyone agreed it was very worthwhile.

"The Tiger's Bay group said they found the trip extremely informative and they found out things about New Lodge they hadn't known, the scale of the damage done to the area, for instance.

"They were surprised so many people had been killed. They realised the type of social problems each community was having were very similar. People left on very good terms with those they had met.

"Everyone said they felt very relaxed in each other's areas. That is something you couldn't have said a few years ago," he says.

"About 40 people have been involved so far and other visits as part of the Making Sense of the Past in the Present research are planned."

During the North Belfast Respect Programme, which runs until Halloween, bus tours are being organised which are less structured and are open to the general public as well.

"It's very much an ongoing process," Paul adds.

For more details of the BoH tours and the North Belfast Respect Programme, go to www.ashton-centre.com or tel: 028 9022 1022

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