

LIFE IN IRELAND

An excerpt from a three-month study abroad

• GLENN WILLIS

Every Wednesday morning, I've been taking a long walk out to West Belfast to visit Michael O'Neill while his wife, Mary, heads down Falls Road for a creative-writing class. Because she's afraid to leave him alone, it's her only chance to get away from home for a few hours during the week. She appreciates the opportunity to go out, I think, and forces a wadded £10 note into my palm when she comes back in the early afternoon.

Michael was one of the few Catholics to find a job in the shipyards down at Belfast Lough, worked as a pipe-fitter and remembers inhaling a good deal of the white dust covering the pipes as he cut them. He's 75 now, and a little more than a year ago he found, somewhat suddenly, that his lungs simply wouldn't work anymore. The asbestos had begun, three decades on, to ruin his lungs' ability to get oxygen to his heart.

Now, he isn't able to walk for more than a few feet without losing his wind entirely. When I arrive around 9:30 a.m., he's usually sleeping in his bed, set up in a kitchen corner, next to a window facing out over the city and toward the sun that warms the room. Mary leaves, demanding that I fix myself some tea if I wish to, and that I read my school books in the living room until he wakes up around 11 and takes a few steps from the kitchen, sits down and breathes a while.

A couple of weeks ago, a nun from the local church came to the door

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while I was reading, dressed smartly, tall and intense. She asked if Michael was awake, I said I thought he was, and after some brief questions about what I was doing there, she went in and spoke with him for a while. She asked how he'd been doing and told him he should count his blessings (he agreed wholeheartedly), and talked with him about his health. I drifted into my reading but listened again when I heard her

saying something about how he should be at peace, knowing that he could go at any moment ...

This seemed a little morbid, but he was eager to say he was at peace. I was lifted from an academic article by her voice launching into the Lord's Prayer, immediately moving into a rhythmic poetic set of psalms or prayers, Michael following as fast as he could, letting her say it alone at times, her letting him catch up himself at others. I felt awkward, eavesdropping on their intimacy, but was fascinated as well. He treasured the communion that came to him daily.

I think what I've liked most about Michael and his wife is the comfort and ease they take in their ordinariness — an antidote to my ambition and self-consideration. Their home is a good place for me to retreat from the enervated atmosphere of the city and the strange America I find myself with most afternoons in dormitories and classrooms.

His color has been really good; he's slim, relaxed and seems fit, except for the oxygen tubes extending from behind his ears, over his cheeks and into his nostrils. His eyes are lively and a very deep blue. He likes to talk. He has somehow escaped the rigid habits of opinion and resentment you might expect a working-class Catholic man to have developed over a lifetime in northern Ireland. He's read a great deal and likes to tell stories about people he's worked with or knows who fought in the world wars — uncles fought in the 1916 Easter Rising, and then again in the Anglo-Irish war. He has a mind as open as any I've found.

I went again on Halloween morning, although Mary had no class to attend; I have enjoyed talking with them and have learned a lot. When I came up the walk after an hour's trek through the city, the window blinds were shut and I could see a candle burning inside. I knocked quietly, thinking Michael might be sleeping, and a middle-aged woman came to the door, confused to hear my accent. She invited me hesitantly into the living room, and there was Michael, laid out in a coffin covered by an Irish flag, pallid and long gone. He'd died Sunday while I was sitting on a beach outside Dublin. I had tea with several family members, told Mary I was sorry when she came home from some errands, agreed to come to the wake in the afternoon and went to class.

I was warmly welcomed at the funeral party. For all its faults, there is a hospitality here that is extremely genuine. A few Guinness' bought for me, some jokes told for my benefit and recommendations on which British comedy videos to rent. Then a speech made by the eldest son on Michael's

well-loved life. Mary was very gracious and asked me to come up again before I leave.

I went back again and visited with Mary several times before she took a trip last Sunday to England to be with her daughter for a couple of weeks. She's taking Michael's death hard — it came suddenly for her, I think — he really did seem absolutely healthy but for the oxygen tubes in his nostrils. Her eyes are embedded in dark circles most of the time, accentuated by the freckles on top of her cheeks, and she said that the anti-depressants the doctor has given her aren't helping much. I came over for lunch one day last week and she mentioned that it was nice to cook for two again.