

# From Seattle to Belfast, Opening my Eyes for the First Time

by Salma Mehter

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Hands for a Bridge provides high school youth with opportunities to explore issues surrounding social justice in their local, regional, and international communities.

One of the biggest factors that has shaped me into the person I am today has been my involvement with the Hands for a Bridge program at my school. The mission for the program is as stated: “Hands for a Bridge provides high school youth with opportunities to explore issues surrounding social justice in their local, regional and international communities. In collaboration with established partners, students engage in intensive artistic dialogue to build bridges of understanding across chasms of race, culture, wealth and poverty. These student leaders will emerge as transformed global citizens with vision and resources to affect vital change in our world.” My work with Hands for a Bridge opened my eyes to issues that I was previously blind to.

As a member of a Hands for a Bridge student delegation, I traveled to Belfast, a city in Northern Ireland, and learned more than I could have ever imagined by observing the post-war society of the region’s Catholics and Protestants.

In Northern Ireland there is a lot of post-war tension that still exists between the Protestants and Catholics. Schools, community centers, and even neighborhoods as a whole are still divided by these two religions. In fact, a peace wall was built to divide neighborhoods of Catholics from Protestants. As the days I had trickled by, I realized that the situation in Belfast could be seen as worse than an upfront war zone. No one was trying to solve the problem there; everyone was instead avoiding it.

One particular encounter in Belfast that I replay over and over in my head was when my group and I were hiking down Cave Hill. We ran into a group of innocent little boys who ranged from 8-12 years in age. More than one of these little boys was smoking a cigarette. We talked to them a little, and one of my group members asked them why they were smoking. A little boy

from the group replied, “Because it makes me look tough.” After speaking to them a while longer, we found out that this particular little boy had been smoking since he was five years old.

What saddens me the most about this incident is that it outlines how children there are generally affected by the political problem: their childhoods are far from normal. It is as if there is no such thing as being a child in Northern Ireland; the people who are affected by the post-war tensions the most are the kids. As we discovered from the boy we met at Cave Hill, many kids aim to do more than just “look tough,” and from very young ages.

My experiences learning about the problems in Belfast and visiting the city have really helped me grow as a person. They have opened my eyes to the whole world. Before I had this experience I feel I was blind to the differences in cultures, religions and regional problems that existed in the world, and saw the world as the place and people I knew. I have come to realize that in many ways, America as a country itself has many distressing problems; it is far from perfect. School systems, including my own, have problems with institutionalized racism, and there are many difficult issues, such as mandatory busing and the inequitable allocation of resources, that contribute to this quandary. I have learned so much from the Hands for a Bridge program: how to build bridges between people of widely disparate backgrounds, that life isn’t always what it seems, that talking and listening are the keys to solving conflicts, and most importantly that honesty and humility are the mediums through which problems in this world can be solved.