

Project Children brings kids from Northern Ireland to Clay

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Ten-year-old Grace Murphy spends most of her days in war-torn Belfast, Northern Ireland, where tensions between Catholics and Protestants have been causing clashes since 1916.

But this summer, Grace got a taste of a different lifestyle.

Grace came to the town of Clay for four weeks, where she stayed with Mark and Ellen Kotzin and their children, Molly, 8, and Noah, 10, thanks to Project Children, a program that brings children from Northern Ireland to America to, as Ellen Kotzin put it, "get away from the troubles they face and give them an example of what it's like to live in a free society where people largely don't judge or fight each other based on religion."

The program began in 1975 by two New York City police officers, brothers who had grown up in County Cork, Ireland. Denis and Pat Mulcahy saw the violence that tore apart Northern Ireland that year, so they decided to do something about it. That summer they brought six kids from Northern Ireland – three Protestants and three Catholics – to Greenwood Lake, NY, where they lived to get the kids away from the violence and the paramilitaries who work double time recruiting kids during school breaks.

The visit was so successful that the brothers launched Project Children. Since then, about 600 kids have participated in the program nationwide.

Kathleen Kelly has been operating Central New York's program since 1980, and it's grown exponentially – with 43 kids coming here, Syracuse had more children than any other host area in the country.

The Kotzins first heard about the program last year at the St. Patrick's Day Parade in Syracuse.

"We had seen news coverage in past years about the program and saw the Project Children group marching in the Syracuse St. Patrick's Day Parade, in which our daughter was dancing with her Irish Dance school," Ellen Kotzin said. "We decided it would be a good experience for our kids to get to know someone from another country, with a different cultural background than what they are used to. We also felt that because we enjoy a good quality of life, it is important to share that with others. We had space in our 8-year-old daughter Molly's room to fit a pull-out bed, so we decided we'd request a young girl who could share her room."

That's how the family connected with Grace, one of eight children from a family in Belfast. Shy and reserved at first, the girl quickly warmed up to the Kotzins. In fact, their Chihuahua, Maggie, would often fall asleep curled up next to her.

"We had expected that we would get a child who would be able to take part in our family experiences and share in our enjoyment of summer activities," Ellen Kotzin said. "Our expectations were completely exceeded by the fact that Grace fit in so well with our family and seemed to enjoy everything we did."

Grace joined Molly and Noah in a variety of activities, including the town of Clay's History Camp, berry picking and Girl Scout camp. Thanks to donations from The MOST and the Syracuse Chiefs, the family got to attend activities and events free of charge to let Grace see what CNY has to offer. She also visited New York state landmarks like the capitol in Albany, the State Museum and Howe Caverns.

In all, it was a satisfying experience for the Kotzins.

"Our family got the satisfaction of knowing we helped make a difference in Grace's life, by showing her new experiences, a different culture, and making friendships that we hope will carry on into the future," Ellen Kotzin said. "Molly gained the 'sister' she never had, and Noah got



a new friend. We think that Grace got a glimpse of what life in America is like, and hopefully a bunch of new experiences that she can look fondly back on."

And, according to a letter Grace's father Danny sent to the family, Grace enjoyed it, too.

"I want to thank you all, family, friends and neighbors for treating her like royalty," Danny Murphy wrote. "I knew from the first day that she was happy to be with you all. You are all very beautiful people, caring and great family standards. I know in my heart and soul that I couldn't have sent her to a better place or family, and I also know that she is aware of that.... She may not realize in full, how lucky she has been to have been hosted by your family, and accepted by your friends, but she will when she gets home and misses you all."

The Kotzins hope to host Grace again next summer, as well as her sister Leisha.

If you are interested in becoming a host family for Project Children, call 391-5455 or visit syracusestpatricksparade.org/projectchildren to get more information.