

## **CNY families welcome children from Northern Ireland**

**By The Post-Standard**

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Photo courtesy of Mark Kotzin

Grace Murphy (second from left) stayed last summer with the Kotzin family: (from left) Ellen Kotzin holding Maggie, the family Chihuahua; Grace; Molly; Noah; and Mark.

**By Allison Kanaley Trudell**

Contributing writer

For the past 30 years, Central New York has been a haven for children who call embattled Northern Ireland their home. Children in the country's six northern counties — for centuries divided by political and religious strife — have had a one-month respite, a chance to visit America and become part of an American family, through Project Children, a national organization founded in 1975.

The Syracuse chapter formed in 1980, when it welcomed 16 Irish children to stay with area host families.

It has since grown into one of the most successful Project Children chapters in the country. Last year, it led the nation with 43 Irish children coming to the area. Organizers hope to increase that number this year by encouraging new families to act as hosts.

Among the visiting children was Grace Murphy, of Belfast, who will return to Mark and Ellen Kotzin's home in Clay this summer as a more confident 10-year-old, according to her father, Danny Murphy, who keeps in contact with the Kotzins through the Internet. The Kotzins have two children, ages 10 and 9, who were happy to have Grace as a sibling for part of the summer.

"We knew it would be a valuable lesson for our kids and helpful for the Irish kids who could use a break," Mark Kotzin said.

Grace's father wrote the Kotzins that although the Irish have come light years as a society, there remain ever-present struggles of poverty, crime and drugs.

"It still can be dangerous at times," Kotzin said. "It's nice to be able to pull the kids out of it, even if it's just for four weeks."

Through the program, the children usually visit for the month of July at no cost to the host family. Project Children picks up the cost of travel, and children who participate get the experience of living in the United States..

The Troubles, as they are known in Ireland, began 40 years ago, as nationalist and loyalist groups clashed in a flurry of violence, wrapped in religious discord between Protestants and Catholics battling for the fate of the country's six northern counties. The nationalists wanted the six counties returned so Ireland could be whole; the British wanted to stay. The result was fighting and bloodshed that permeated generations. The troubles made life difficult in a region marred by poverty, political and religious skirmishes, and crime. While an uneasy peace was declared in 1999, the region remains a place where being a child — and growing up safely — can be tricky business.

Grace's father works with youth who have been through the prison system in Belfast to give them skills so they can get back into society and be productive.

"He was very grateful," Mark Kotzin said. "He recognizes the value of a program that helps build bridges between the Catholics and the Protestants ... We recognize what a wonderful value this is not only for the kids, but for the host families like us. Grace was just a delight."

And it gave the Kotzins a renewed appreciation for their way of life.

"It gave us a chance to re-experience some things," like berry picking, and going on day trips, Mark Kotzin said.

Many area host families welcome back the same children year after year, others get different children each year.

For Debbie and David West, of Camillus, this will be a special year — the seventh summer Steven McAllister will spend with their family. He will come a little earlier than the rest of the Syracuse-area Project Children contingent so he can walk his host mother, Debbie, down the aisle at her daughter's wedding.

The first time Steven visited at age 10, he was described to the West family as "naughty." But when he walked through the doorway, the connection was immediate, Debbie West said.

"We loved him, and we have brought him back ever since. He is the light of my life."

Debbie West said not a week goes by that she doesn't hear from Steven, who she said works hard to stay out of trouble so he can stay with Project Children and return each summer.

"It keeps him focused," she said. "It's a hardship over there, and I know this has made a difference for him."

Since Project Children began in Syracuse, an estimated 8,000 Irish children have made the trip to Central New York. Children have grown, families have moved on and scrapbooks full of memories are held by the Irish children and their host families. And from the very beginning, each trip across the pond has been guided by the hand of Kathleen Kelly, Project Children area coordinator, who was there to welcome the first Irish children to Syracuse in 1980, and every busload of children since.

She is "the most amazing woman I've ever met," Debbie West said.

Kelly is quick to pass credit for Project Children's success to the host families, who volunteer to open their homes and hearts to children year after year. "It's not without the help of a lot of people," Kelly said.

Funding for Project Children comes from donations and one fundraiser.

"People have been wonderful," Kelly said. "There's not a gain in it, except for wanting to help children."

The people who step up "aren't necessarily Irish families. They are wonderful people who just want to do something for children," she said.

In October 2009, Kelly attended a Project Children conference in Belfast that, for a woman accustomed to the heartbreak and joy of Northern Ireland, was surprisingly emotional. It turned out to be a reunion of sorts.

"I met with organizers who were here in my house 30 years ago, and we met children we had here in Syracuse 23 years ago," Kelly said. "They talked about what it was like when they were here. I can't tell you how much it meant to go to Belfast and see those kids we had."

### To learn more

If you're interested in Project Children, plan to attend a meeting 6:30 p.m. Tuesday at the Cicero branch of the Northern Onondaga Public Library. Call Mark Kotzin at 751-5906 to RSVP or for more information. New potential host families will be able to pick up an application and listen to a brief presentation about the organization. Visit [projectchildrensyracuse.org](http://projectchildrensyracuse.org) for more information or to download an application.

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