

## The Wishing Chair Foundation

Launch at the Embassy of Ireland, Washington DC Feb 20<sup>th</sup> 2019

Washington DC Feb 20 2019 - Ambassador of Ireland to the US, Daniel Mulhall hosted students, faculty and guests from Community Colleges, Universities and Irish Organisations at the Irish Embassy in Washington DC. to launch 'The Wishing Chair Foundation'. The Wishing Chair Foundation takes its name from a scenic spot on the Donegal Coastline, and it was the brainchild of Donegal natives Dr. Niamh Hamill and Mr. John O'Connell, who have been running study abroad programs in Ireland's Northwest since 2001.

The Wishing Chair Foundation aims to raise funds to provide scholarships for US Community Colleges who do not have the means to access study abroad programs to Ireland. Ambassador Mulhall spoke about his admiration for Ireland's diaspora in and his determination to develop and diversify Ireland's links in the US, including in the education sphere. In addition, he regards the Wishing Chair Foundation as adding a new dimension to this relationship. After a long tradition of Irish emigration to the United States, he said, it was time to ensure that there was a warm welcome for those who wanted to return.

John O'Connell emphasized the suitability of Ireland for educational programs in Ireland, particularly the warm welcome and rich cultural narratives that were accessible to all.

During the launch, there were powerful testimonials from students who had completed programs in Donegal. Kirsten Quinn, from Birmingham Southern College, Alabama, said 'my choice of study and my career aspirations were a direct result of my transformative experience in Ireland. As a native of the Southern United States, I've grown up knowing the struggle for equality within my own backyard and the ongoing fight for civil rights in America. However, exploration of study in Ireland allowed me to make my abstract understanding of the fight for civil rights around the world more concrete. This recognition was the opening of the door to what Seamus Heaney would call the "Republic of Conscience"'.

Thomas Boyd, from Clackamas Community College Oregon said "growing up, I had a hard life. I didn't have access to programs or experiences that would allow me to take advantage of opportunities to travel abroad or even have the chance to attend a university. However, through the program at Clackamas Community College I was able to open myself up to a world I never knew existed. This profound event was only possible thanks to programs like the Wishing Chair Foundation. I learned about my history, my culture and myself. I gained a deeper understanding of where I came from. I came back from Ireland and connected with family where there was little connection before. We visited Ballyshannon and I had this moment on the dock that I really connected with emotionally and spiritually. Standing where so many emigrated from, imagining the uncertainty and fear for the chance at a better life for themselves and their future generations, was powerful and life changing."

Jaylan Berry, from Huntsville, Alabama spoke of his connection as an African-American with his visit to Derry. 'I did not know about Ireland's Civil Rights struggle, and I did not know about their Bloody Sunday, but I was truly moved to learn how similar our stories were.'

The launch was attended by board members of the Milwaukee Irish Festival, The Women of Irish Heritage New Jersey, and many Universities and Community Colleges that participate in study programs in Ireland, including Hawaii Community College, Drew University New Jersey and Forsyth Technical College, North Carolina. Also in attendance were many from the Irish-American Community in DC.

Dr. Niamh Hamill, academic director of the Wishing Chair Foundation, concluded the launch by reminding the gathering that the goal of the foundation was to change lives. 'If we bring students to Ireland to share narratives, we create empathy, and from empathy comes critical thinking, and the urge to change things for the better' she said.

The Wishing Chair Foundation website is [www.wishingchairfoundation.org](http://www.wishingchairfoundation.org)