

Lyric Theatre Belfast

Elevating the learning experience
beyond the classroom



**IRISH AMERICAN
PARTNERSHIP**

Story Seeds

Fighting Words Northern Ireland supports
childhood literacy and self expression

Focus On Northern Ireland

2024 Appeal



SparkStart Digital

Bringing digital skills
training to Belfast

“ There are hundreds of people who will be helped by this investment in the SparkStart initiative, and I’m so moved that the Irish American Partnership would think to do so in collaboration with our efforts. ”

U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland for Economic Affairs, Joseph P. Kennedy III



Sir Bruce Robinson, Special Envoy Joseph Kennedy III, CEO Mary Sugrue with Lyric Theatre Belfast Young Artists

Letter from Belfast

Dear Friends,

As I write this report, I am conscious that we sit at a very interesting time politically in Northern Ireland.



After two years without a functioning government in Northern Ireland, local power sharing political institutions were re-established successfully in February, with Michelle O'Neill of Sinn Fein as First Minister and Emma Little-Pengelly of the Democratic Unionist Party as Deputy First Minister.

Initial impressions have been most encouraging with both politicians working well together to tackle the major challenges that are faced in education, health, and the economy. However uncertainty exists over the future of these power sharing arrangements, due to the newly elected Labour Government in London, and even more importantly, the local fallout from these elections is unclear.

In the face of these changes, I am delighted that the important work of the Irish American Partnership, to support children and young people from all communities to come together in Northern Ireland, continues unabated.

I see at first hand the significant impact that the Partnership's financial support has on transforming the lives of these young people, from the expansion of the Lyric Theatre Belfast's work, to the outreach from the newly expanded Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's University.

One impactful program - *Story Seeds* - is being delivered through a collaboration between Fighting Words Northern Ireland, the Seamus Heaney Center, and the Partnership to introduce children from disadvantaged backgrounds to writing their own stories.

Thank you very much for your kind and generous help - you continue to make a very positive impact on lives in Northern Ireland.

Sir Bruce Robinson

Board Member, Irish American Partnership

Lyric Theatre Belfast

Bringing the transformative power of performance art directly to communities, schools, and colleges throughout Northern Ireland.



Since 1968, the Lyric Theatre in Belfast has functioned as a beacon of artistic expression, committed to nurturing homegrown talent where playwrights, poets, and actors hone their craft and bring their unique visions to life. The Lyric has also played a critical role in shaping the cultural identity of Northern Ireland, reinforcing the indispensable value of the arts in a historically divided society.

“*The generous support of the Irish American Partnership enables us to work in the areas of greatest need right across Northern Ireland. A huge thank you on behalf of the 15,000 young people we work with every year!*”

- Claire Murray, Head of Development

These resources include behind-the-scenes cast videos and notes from the production team for use by teachers and students studying the text of plays performed.

From the script to the stage, this program provides invaluable insight enabling students to elevate their learning experience beyond their classroom, build confidence, and forge new friendships.



A first theatre visit with Goliath Trust school students

The Lyric serves as a dynamic force for community engagement through its Creative Learning programs, which the Partnership is very proud to support. Through a diverse array of drama courses and outreach programs, the Lyric's commitment to accessibility and education is illustrated by providing resources to schools and colleges.



Creative learning program for children ages 6 - 10



Athletes from Belfast and Boston in the ring at Boston's City Hall Plaza

Bridging the way to a brighter future, this sports program cultivates teamwork, perseverance, and respect for cultural diversity.

Established in 2016, Bridges Beyond Boxing (BBB) is a cross-community boxing exchange program that encourages the integration of young people from all traditions in Northern Ireland, as well as from other parts of Ireland.

Coaches Joe Lowe and Allen “Spike” Martin organize, recruit, train, and deliver sporting events on both sides of the Atlantic, allowing these young boxers to unleash their passion for competition while discovering life-changing sporting and cultural experiences, creating brighter futures and communities.



Referee Joe Lowe with organizer Stephen Power and winning youth middleweight Bobby Flood

The exchange works both ways. In 2023 the Boston coaches took a team of boxers to fight in North Belfast and Ballymoney. This past May, twelve young fighters from Northern Ireland traveled to Boston and took to the ring in City Hall Plaza, matched with young people from across the state of Massachusetts. These teens, each from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, came together over a shared love of the sport.

“ *This program gave me an amazing opportunity – to go on this experience and create great memories that will impact me for the rest of my life.* ”
- Sherry Gallagher, Ballymoney

According to BBB Board Member and Partnership supporter Stephen Power, “Boxing is just the vehicle. It’s the cultural experience and cross-community sportsmanship that creates memories for a lifetime. Most of these kids on both sides of the Atlantic come from under-resourced communities and it’s usually their first time on an airplane.”

The Partnership has proudly supported this cultural exchange for the past three years.

Story Seeds

Showing every young person in Northern Ireland that creative writing is about joy, imagination, and creativity.



Visiting the Fighting Words NI Hub at Connswater, East Belfast

Fighting Words Northern Ireland (FWNI) uses the creative practice of writing and storytelling to inspire young people, from ages 6 to 18, particularly those living in areas of disadvantage, to build their literacy, self-expression, creativity, and confidence.

The Partnership proudly supports Fighting Words' schools program, *Story Seeds* – developed in partnership with sister charity, Fighting Words Ireland. This program increases cross-community activities with children and young people through engagement in shared creative writing activities. It connects young people from different communities and traditions in schools and community groups in border areas including Newry, Armagh, Derry-Londonderry, and Coleraine.

Through writing a shared story - the first chapter written by one group and passed to the second group to build upon - the young writers discuss the elements of their writing and the story writing process. The finished stories are published both in print and online, bringing a sense of pride and accomplishment to the young authors.

Over a six month period in 2023, the program facilitators ran 92 schools workshops for 2,387 participants. The schoolchildren published two eZines of their writing and held a celebration event at their hub at Connswater, East Belfast.



Schools from Monaghan and Newry at a Story Seeds Cross-Border celebration

“*The pupils were really excited when they were told their story was online and that they are now published authors. This has inspired them to continue to work hard on writing chapters two and three to finish our story.*”

- Fighting Words Teacher Participant



The Future of Teaching at St. Malachy's

Business Studies class at St. Malachy's College

Steeped in 190 years of tradition, St. Malachy's is an all-boys school in a socially deprived area in North Belfast. The grammar school (ages 12-18) brings together some 1,180 pupils from a variety of backgrounds.

While the school has a diverse intake with a high proportion of 'Free School Meals' students and also a number of students with special educational needs (SEN), the majority of students progress to university courses throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland, with a high number of students being the first in their family to access third level education.

Recognizing the current education IT curriculum is outdated, the school has embarked on a pioneering new development program creating a Digital Hub for Creative Technologies and Learning. The Irish American Partnership is supporting the school in bolstering its digital skills curriculum - providing a platform for these students to excel in the digital age.

While addressing the digital skills gap, the Hub is also tackling larger issues facing educational provision including gender, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. Said Principal Paul McBride:

"Thank you for the very kind donation from the Irish American Partnership which has been a great help to us in tackling all of the historical, socio-economic, cultural, and SEN barriers to learning. We bring

together many different learners, who would never have chosen to be with each other, to nourish them through digital projects, and equip them with the skills required for employment – a real game changer!"

Not only does the Digital Hub benefit the students of St. Malachy's, but also eleven other local post-primary schools who work in collaboration. Students include a range of boys and girls from Catholic, Protestant, grammar and non-selective secondary schools, the majority of whom are from socially deprived areas, regularly attend scheduled classes in the Digital Hub.

In this way, the innovative program uses digital skills to bring young people from different communities together.



Principal Paul McBride with students



U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland for Economic Affairs, Joseph P. Kennedy III at the launch of SparkStart Digital Skills program

Igniting Opportunity

The Partnership's \$100,000 investment launches a tailored skills program for marginalized young people in Belfast.

SparkStart Digital, in partnership with Fastrack Into IT (FIT), is a new educational program launched in May to support 350 participants in Belfast. Partnership President & CEO Mary Sugrue and FIT CEO Peter Davitt presented the tailored digital skills initiative for disadvantaged young people.

SparkStart Digital was designed in honor of Special Envoy Kennedy to further support the economic development work he has achieved across Northern Ireland. With a goal of creating job training in IT for unemployed marginalized young people, SparkStart is customized to provide targeted support and opportunities to acquire digital skills, build confidence, and access pathways to further learning and quality employment.

“There are hundreds of people who will be helped by this investment, and I’m so moved that the Irish American Partnership would think to do so in collaboration with our efforts.”

U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland for Economic Affairs, Joseph P. Kennedy III

“We are proud to invest in Northern Ireland’s future through the support of the FIT SparkStart Digital initiative. Continuing our work of the past 38 years, we are committed to bolstering the economic development and educational opportunities afforded to young people in Belfast,” said Chief Executive Mary Sugrue.

SparkStart Digital will facilitate the class of participants for three years. The program prioritizes job seekers facing challenges, including young people who left school early, women returning to work after a hiatus, newly arrived migrant communities, and special educational needs learners.

“Our journey began in 1989 with the Irish American Partnership as our first funder at the Ballymun Job Centre in North Dublin. I look forward to witnessing the success of SparkStart Digital here in Belfast,” said Peter Davitt.



CEO Mary Sugrue, U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland for Economic Affairs, Joseph P. Kennedy III, FIT CEO Peter Davitt, Sir Bruce Robinson, Irish American Partnership Board member and former head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service



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Will you help us support young people in Northern Ireland today?

CONNECT | GIVE BACK | CHANGE LIVES



Partnership members are committed to investing in the future of Northern Ireland - its youth. Can you help us today with a donation to one of the programs detailed in this impact report?

Yes! I would like to support:

- The Lyric Theatre Belfast - Creative Learning**
- Bridges Beyond Boxing - Cultural Exchange Through Sport**
- Fighting Words Northern Ireland - Story Seeds Cross-border Program**
- St. Malachy's College - Digital Hub Collaboration**
- SparkStart Digital - Employment & Skills Education**
- Where it is needed most**

We encourage our donors to select a school, region, or community program as the recipient of your philanthropy - making you a partner in their success.

Please accept my gift in the amount \$2,500 \$1,000 \$500 \$250 \$100 Other _____

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