

The Healing Power of Human Connections Along the Border Corridor

Denzil McDaniel

Denzil McDaniel was a journalist for 40 years with the Impartial Reporter newspaper in Enniskillen, his home town. He was editor of the paper for 27 years until 2013, during which time he covered events along the Fermanagh Border.

Since stepping back from the paper, he has continued to work as a columnist and commentator.

He is also involved in cross-community, cross-Border reconciliation work, and recently edited the book "Our Shared Way of Life: Listening to Border People" with the Clones Family Resource Centre.



In her long career at the heart of local and central Government, Aideen McGinley had an early taste of being caught in the middle of divided politicians.

As a young official at Strabane District Council when Sinn Féin was in the initial stages of gaining council seats, Aideen took up her usual place in the chamber when Unionist members arrived with eight-foot-high black silo liners and proceeded to install them down the middle of the room so they could conduct business without having to look at their Republican counterparts. They also used a megaphone to speak across the physical barrier.

Recalling how the councillors had used the back of her chair to wrap the material around, she recalls: "I was caught in the middle. Literally."

The incident was somehow symbolic of the divisions between the north's two communities in the 1980s, and indeed Strabane's geographical position just inside Northern Ireland meant the town experienced the real practical problems caused by a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Strabane was Aideen's hometown, and her father, a local vet, had clients split about 50-50 between north and south. She says: "The boot of his car was divided in two, with drugs for north and south, each having its own pricing and regulations. Our house was just across from the customs [building], and we were blown up eight times. I remember British soldiers hiding in our flowerbeds in shootouts!"

In addition, one of Aideen's early jobs was across in Donegal, which meant her journey to work and back saw her stop at four to six checkpoints each crossing, to the point that she knew most of the military personnel who regularly waved her on.

Such was border life in the 1970s and 80s; bombings, approved and unapproved roads, and crossings blown up by the authorities to prevent them from being used in attacks. All this made everyday logistics difficult for people who lived there, much less cooperation on matters of mutual economic and community benefit.

"And yet," says Aideen, "people just got on with it."

In 2023, considerable contact exists along a border now virtually invisible since the *1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement* enabled two jurisdictions within the European Union to forge greater links along the border region. Indeed, there are numerous links today between north and south generally. Those connections remain despite an unsettling effect in the aftermath of Brexit.

Since the *Agreement*, the natural coming together of both jurisdictions in North-South cooperation has grown exponentially on an all-island basis to the benefit of both. Notwithstanding the sensitivities of a debate over potential constitutional change, there appears to be an acceptance of the benefits of transcending borders to improve lives regarding non-controversial matters where sharing will enrich society.

In fact, contacts across the border are probably more significant than at any time since Partition.

Firstly, there was an increase after both jurisdictions became members of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, but much more so since the *Agreement*.

A newspaper report, '*Little Interaction Between People Living North and South, New Poll Shows*',¹ was criticised by border people. It's fair to suggest that separation over a century of Partition has led to a lack of understanding between people at opposite ends of the island.

One observer told me: "The north that the south sees doesn't exist. And the south that the north sees doesn't exist either."

But it's too much of a generalisation. Indeed it's wrong to suggest that there is no rapprochement in border areas.

Further examination of the figures also featured in another headline, '*Geography Matters*' in an article that "examined whether North-South connections decreased with distance from the border".

One woman told me that the further south one goes (and possibly north), the less understanding there is of the border region; border dwellers, North-South, Protestant-Catholic and so on have more contact with their counterparts. Many live in one jurisdiction, work in another, or cross the border to socialise, play sports, visit family, and so on.

It's estimated that at least 150 official points of North-South cooperation align with various issues and interests from business, workers' rights, sport, waterways, climate change, arts and culture and much more. That's all outside of the work by the Shared Island Initiative launched by Micheál Martin when he was Taoiseach.

Organic links between communities along both sides of the border have also fostered contact. A range of formal schemes, such as the EU PEACE programmes, have encouraged the development of relationships for decades.

Similar to peacebuilding, much of the work that connected communities across the border was conducted discreetly and was ongoing for some time. Even before the 1998 *Agreement*, community leaders were working on ways to initiate projects to improve everyday lives, whether economic-based or focused on health cooperation, tourism or arts and culture.

In the context of the troubled backdrop of the 1990s, the courage of officials and other visionary people who defied the odds to imagine the advantages of links across borders, whether physically geographical or in hearts and minds, should not be underestimated.

In Fermanagh, where I worked as a journalist throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s, there were 115 Troubles-related murders between 1971 and 1994.²

Of that total, 100 were killed by the IRA (Irish Republican Army), including 65 security force personnel. The remaining were primarily killed by the British Army (responsible for nine deaths), the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), with a further two killed by Loyalist paramilitaries.

In the early 1970s, Loyalists in Fermanagh also carried out bombings across the border in places such as Belturbet in Co. Cavan, Clones in Co. Monaghan and Pettigo in Co. Donegal.

The dark days of the conflict created borders in hearts and minds as well as a physical schism between north and south along the 300 miles of a land border.

In a recent project undertaken by the Clones Family Resource Centre in County Monaghan, borderers have been speaking about their experiences, published in the book *Our Shared Way of Life*.

Behind the statistics, many stories indicate that it's still difficult for some to move on.

The numbers of Protestants in the area have dwindled, and there's a sense of a community still feeling beleaguered. During an interview, one participant spoke about the bestowing of transgenerational trauma.

Sarah, a Protestant from County Fermanagh who had a relative killed by the IRA, says many people grew up in the Troubles who "just rolled with the punches". She added:

You're in survival mode, and I think it's only when you get away that you realise how bizarre it is. Many people are still living in the shadow of the past and are still carrying the trauma in their head. I think we're seeing that in the generational trauma ... presenting itself in different ways.

The book details stories of Protestants who lost loved ones and members of their community living in existential fear over those years. The book also relates stories of how the border conflict, different to that in urban areas, affected the lives of Catholics and Nationalists.

Mary, a Fermanagh Catholic, said: “My daily life was under occupation, with armed soldiers, armed UDR, armed police. I suppose I was conscious that I didn’t really have very many rights. It was at their pleasure that I [could] function in my community.” Mary’s family home was raided regularly. “We were subjected to a lot of searches, a lot of interruptions to our daily life in so far as if I wanted to travel three miles up the road, I could guarantee to be stopped at least twice.”

Another Catholic from the north, Brenda’s family, lived close to the border, so they travelled back and forth regularly for work and socialising. Although residing in Fermanagh, they went out socially in Ballinamore, Leitrim, Cavan, Swanlinbar, Ballyconnell and Belturbet.

“You went out prepared for the fact that maybe you would be stopped, and you wouldn’t reach your destination,” she says. And because the family had a business a few miles from home across the border in County Cavan, they also had to travel across for work.

However, more than the regular inconvenience of disruption to life, Brenda recalls the “pure fear” of approaching checkpoints. She says: “Waiting for that light to go, I’d start praying the Rosary. It was mostly the UDR, even more than the British Army. ... someone [always] knew you and your background; they made it known they knew you, where you lived.”

Marius grew up right on the border, on the southern side, and remembers when there was much more of a sense of crossing a political boundary. He remembers a level of fear in his early life crossing into Fermanagh when you could meet the B-Specials (less commonly known as Ulster Special Constabulary (USC)) and the RUC and, vice-versa, when his uncle from the north came to visit, he would push his wife to “come home, to get up, stop talking” when it was getting dark as the B-Specials would be on the road, recalling the “intimidation” at checkpoints.

In a previous publication, Marius recalls the practical difficulties farmers on the border had to overcome. Living on a farm in Monaghan, his uncle constructed a short road, nicknamed “the Khyber Pass”, to avoid a lengthy

journey when moving his cattle to another part of Monaghan, as his farm was effectively surrounded by Fermanagh land.

So, following the ceasefires of 1994, while the aftermath of the conflict focused on wider political differences, the physical scars of the conflict in the county warranted attention too.

Two organisations in Fermanagh on either side of the divide conducted campaigns in the immediate post-ceasefire years. FARM (Farmers and Residents Against Military Bases) claimed that British Army watchtowers, permanent checkpoints and military installations served no useful purpose anymore and were disrupting their lives.

Meanwhile, FEAR (Fear Encouraged Abandoned Roots) saw Unionist politicians take up the cases of Protestant farmers who had fled border farms and brought them to meetings with government ministers to seek compensation.

Under Gerry Burns's enlightened leadership, Fermanagh District Council encouraged cross-community and cross-border links, and when Aideen succeeded him, she continued in the same vein. She was the first woman to attain such a senior position in local government.

In this context, Fermanagh District Council showed foresight in forging ahead with community relations efforts, particularly hosting a peace conference in 1996. The event, Remember and Change, launched a report with the same title that aimed to build relationships and trust at a time, one might say, when it looked like an uphill task.

Aideen, then in the post of chief executive, was instrumental in Fermanagh in hosting the conference with keynote speaker John Paul Lederach, the American professor regarded as an expert in peacebuilding, conflict resolution and mediation.

Aideen explains that David Bolton chaired the Fermanagh peace partnership, among the first of its kind in Northern Ireland. All councils eventually followed suit and formed similar alliances. It brought together councillors from across the political divide, the local community, voluntary representatives, and the statutory sector to create a peace strategy funded by the EU.

Held in Enniskillen, the Fermanagh peace partnership conference saw over 200 people from across the community coming together to consider building a stronger foundation for peace.

Aideen recalls: “The EU commissioner flew in from Brussels to open the conference such was its significance, and the keynote speech by John Paul Lederach reminded us all that it’s not about ‘forgive and forget’ but ‘remember and change’.” She continued:

In particular, an interlude produced by David Bolton to the song ‘The Island’ by Paul Brady stands out. The song had difficult connotations, but in a beautifully choreographed piece of dance by local young people accompanied by a video illustrating the Troubles aligning with the words, a very strong and poignant moment was created. When the audience, in silence, stood up and applauded, it was one of those breakthrough moments that still resonated and was a turning point for the work of building peace.

So, under the radar, much was happening to underpin reconciliation, even before the *Agreement*. Aideen uses the term “watering the seeds of peace” in those early post-conflict days. Many of those seeds are now blooming in work, which continues to be based on human connections, as described by one writer, “the healing power of human connections”.

At a difficult time, Fermanagh later embarked on a People and Place Strategy, the first local integrated development strategy in the north. From this, Fermanagh’s mission statement emerged: A happy, healthy people at peace and proud of their place.

After moving to Fermanagh from her native Strabane to take up economic development posts in the 1980s, Aideen became chief executive in the Lakeland County. Pointing out that Fermanagh touched on a shared border with Donegal, Leitrim, Cavan and Monaghan – every southern border county except Louth – Aideen said: “We just couldn’t ignore the fact that so much of our hinterland was in another jurisdiction.”

Gerry Burns had been instrumental in forming an organisation called the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN).

“Derry-Donegal was really porous, so there were good links and great working across. Newry-Dundalk was always a strong economic corridor with

good business relationships,” explains Aideen. So, ICBAN saw northern council chief executives in Fermanagh, Omagh, Armagh, and Dungannon engage with the southern council county managers in Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan and Monaghan to identify opportunities. Aideen added:

They were visionary people, and there were genuine discussions about [the] potential for the area and overcoming barriers. It's often easier for officials to get together, and it was important that councillors didn't get nervous. So, there were regular meetings, and officials worked on projects.

Fermanagh seconded a community relations official, David Clarke, to ICBAN for six years, and the body acted as a lobbying group. Among the projects they researched was a possible East-West corridor linking the A4 road in the north from Dungannon to the N16 at Sligo.

Officials worked hard with councillors who overcame political differences to achieve real change. A critical project was the Erne-Shannon Waterway, and one councillor quipped that the fish on Lough Melvin didn't recognise a border.

There are numerous examples of organisations and individuals who worked, and continue to work, right along the border corridor.

Another of the many ventures was the Clones-Erne East Partnership, a cooperation between Monaghan County Council, Clones Town Council and Fermanagh District Council which met regularly to discuss resolving issues affecting life north and south of the border. They discussed potholes in the roads, improving housing and campaigns to educate young people about the dangers on the streets after several young people in the area had been killed.

By concentrating on bread-and-butter issues and depoliticising them, progress was made in making lives better for people. This was especially relevant to health, and in the 1990s, a partnership – Cooperation and Working Together (CAWT) – was formed. Tom Frawley, then chief executive of the Western Health and Social Services Board based in Derry, was a key figure in setting up CAWT.

Formed by the Ballyconnell Agreement in 1992, the organisation takes in 11 counties north and south along the border corridor, five in the north being Derry, Tyrone, Fermanagh, Armagh and Down.

The six southern counties included Donegal, Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan, Louth, and Sligo, which, while not directly touching the border, were included as part of the hinterland. It was a collaboration involving CEOs and senior managers of health boards, trusts and organisations in the health service systems in both jurisdictions. Still, it was far from simply being a bureaucratic exercise.

From humble beginnings of sharing best practices, it has continued to have a significant impact along the border region, with one of its projects significantly entitled Putting Patients, Clients and Families First.

Until her recent retirement, Bernie McCrory was chief officer of CAWT for 16 years and central to the efforts. She said: “As far as people’s health was concerned, it was about securing the best access to services for patients; this was enabled by combining the human, financial and physical resources within both jurisdictions.” She recalls travelling to work in Derry from her home along the Fermanagh-Donegal border and crossing the border five times before getting to her office.

In addition, having worked as a hospital manager in Tyrone County and Erne Hospitals and later as Directorate Manager for Surgery and Critical Care at the Altnagelvin Hospital in Derry, Bernie was well-placed to understand many of the health needs of people along the border.

She recalls one project involving the North-West cancer centre. Cancer patients from places such as Letterkenny in Donegal had to go to Dublin or Galway for radiotherapy, burdening already pressurised families. When the then CEO, Quentin Coey, at Belfast City Hospital, was approached about access to radiotherapy for Donegal patients, he was highly supportive. He immediately helped to create a new patient pathway which facilitated approximately 25 people each year (each for treatment, which lasted 6-8 weeks).

Benefits included training for ambulance personnel on both sides of the border and patients travelling from the north to southern hospitals for various procedures and operations.

Another example of collaboration was paediatric, congenital and cardiac surgery which combined the scarce skill base of surgeons in both Belfast and Dublin; this meant the critical mass of both populations enabled the surgeons to maintain these specialist skills.

There were many advantages of treating both jurisdictions as a joint enterprise, as envisaged by the EU Interreg programme of encouraging cooperation between regions. Patients in Cavan-Monaghan hospitals waiting up to four years for ENT treatment benefitted from an EU-funded scheme that saw two new consultants appointed to the existing ENT team in Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry and Craigavon Hospital in Portadown. These consultants held outpatient clinics and undertook day-case surgery in Monaghan General Hospital. Patients requiring more intermediate or major surgeries travelled to the Southern Health and Social Care Trust hospitals in Northern Ireland. In common with many others, this service has been mainstreamed and continues to be delivered today.

Our island is so small it makes sense to utilise resources to optimal levels; it helps [...] attract and retain staff, [...] provides easier access to many services for patients, and the combined populations enable the further development of specialist centres.

The pioneering work of those delivering health and social care services along the border corridor has continued to overcome many challenges, such as indemnity for staff working in the opposite jurisdiction, mutual recognition of qualifications and consistency of staff training. There is a broad recognition that using the many economies of scale through collaborative working can serve patients better.

The International Fund for Ireland (IFI), established in 1986, was another vital source of providing resources, pouring millions of pounds into over 6,000 projects across the island.

It continues to fund projects which help make human connections. In July this year, an event was held in the Glens Centre, Manorhamilton, County Leitrim, to mark the end of a five-year cross-community, cross-border project, Across the Lines. The keynote speaker was Dr Connal Parr of the University of Northumbria. His speech had a significant title: Paving the Pathway to Peace – The Role of Citizens and the Arts.

Supported by IFI, Ruth Gonsalves Moore, an experienced figure in reconciliation work since the 1990s, spearheaded the peacebuilding and engagement programme. Over five years from 2018, the programme involved discussions, workshops, courses, and events.

She says she worked with Dr Parr to shape a programme that reflected the situation along the border, working out of a southern cultural context to shape a relevant programme, looking at texts over 100 years from north and south, pre- and post-Partition as well as listening to contemporary voices and offering a way to reflect on how identity and the cultural imagination are not ‘fixed’ but evolve over time and space. Ruth said:

Our [Cultural Conversations] programme was a little unusual in some ways – because it’s rural and border, and it wasn’t always easy creating a programme that engaged people given differences [on] both sides of the border.

A lot of creative and heart energy goes into making these things happen and bringing people together, and that does not always get seen.

Ruth, who describes border people as the “connective tissue” between north and south, explained that the programme started bringing people together through shared interests in arts, culture, creativity, drama, history, heritage, and so on.

“Cultural Conversations made a more focused programme allowing for deeper conversation and reflection,” says Ruth, who said she was “heartened by the buzz” of the final night with “all the ideas emerging and ways in which people want to stay in contact and explore issues further.”

“That’s very positive and encouraging for the future,” she says.

In the feedback, a participant in the Contested Histories Initiative said: “The best thing was the very open opportunity to hear about and discuss the complex nature of our shared history.”

Another comment about the Cultural Conversations programme said: “It is important to examine how often a simplistic Protestant/Catholic dichotomy is assumed when the reality is much more blurred.”

The Across the Lines funding support in 2017 was a further investment ‘in people and relationships’.

Reflecting on the programme, Ruth explained: “One of the underlying and motivating reasons for the Across the Lines programme was identified in an early community meeting in autumn 2017,” outlining where local people discussed the challenges and needs.

They identified:

- The lack of provision in the area;
- The lack of all kinds of infrastructure, such as the cross-border railway, which negatively impacts the connectivity between the south and north;
- Relentless outward youth migration; and
- The histories and legacies of Partition and “the Troubles in and about Northern Ireland”, which have left distrust, silence and ignorance in its wake.

It described the situation as “living back-to-back to each other, two communities looking in different directions” despite only 20 to 30 minutes travel time between one place and another and despite the existing all island cultural bodies.

“At this meeting, there was a strong desire to bring people together around common and shared interests,” says Ruth.

The Across the Lines programme engaged 710 participants through 22 initiatives reaching at least 4,499 people through a small number of wider community events.

In closing the programme, Ruth outlined that she believed participants benefitted from the programme through “new confidences gained and the unlocking of new creativity”, and broader benefits being “a deepening of our commonality along the border region as well as a deeper awareness of our diversity across the porous yet dividing borderline” while also outlining that in “some small way, the programme has illuminated the contribution an arts venue can make to peace in rural border regions; and our hope is too that we have positively shaped thinking about how to support rural border needs – into the future”.

Part of the Across the Lines programme was a project with Kabosh, an independent theatre company, with a script by Carlo Gebler about the closure of the railway line between Enniskillen and Sligo.

Project leader Sally Rees says:

It was a brilliant opportunity to get young people together from Enniskillen and Leitrim who would never have met each other

otherwise. This gave them focus and purpose [in] working creatively together, but the magic happened in the time in between when they could just be together, chatting, laughing, sharing food.

Sally, a teacher at the Enniskillen Royal Grammar School, explained that the play allowed the young students from either side of the border to find out about the history of the railway but also connected them to their past.

At the end, they revealed how each of the characters was connected to them and their families, with each character taking off their costume and saying:

I'm Nelly, the girl in the red dress on the train.

The journalist was a friend of the family.

The engine driver was my great-uncle.

The fireman's my father. He left when I was 10; I never saw him again.

Owen Maguire, an uncle by marriage.

The Huckster, he's the black sheep of my family.

I'm the daughter of Kelly, the customs man though I tend, on the whole, not to tell any people that.

We'll spare you the rest; you get the point. We're all connected to everyone you saw.

We are the people of the railway.

Sally continues, "This was the springboard for the second piece; they wanted to explore who they are now rather than look at the past. The young people didn't want to talk about the border. They are more concerned about the climate, the mental health crisis, [and] anxiety. Working on the projects gave them space to explore these issues and emphasised how much they had in common."

At the time, I was reading Ali Smith's 'Autumn', and the opening section All Across the Country was a really powerful ... text that we used with the participants to explore the impact of Brexit. One of the lines is, 'All across the country, people were asked to leave'. This line

prompted one of the participants, Lukas, originally from Lithuania but who had been here since he was four, to tell us about his family's experience of having to fill out settler forms.

While Lukas and his sister had got permission to stay, they were still waiting to find out if their mother would be allowed to. While we were working on the play, they found out she could stay – a year after the rest of the family. At the end of the play, we asked the participants to imagine what they would like the country to look and be like. And they rewrote the lines and ... changed it to 'All across the country, people were asked to stay'.

“ ... they pulled Lukas in from the audience to join them. It was a really powerful and poignant moment”, says Sally.

She continued:

If it had not been for the play, we would never have known about what Lukas and his family had to go through, and it gives us all a real understanding of the impact of Brexit. It demonstrated just how important the arts are for giving [us] space to explore what is going on in the world and how we feel, think and react to it.

At the very end of the piece, the young performers take off their hoodies, which were green, white, orange, red, and blue, and they said:

'I am not red; I am not blue; I am not green.' And they reveal T-shirts they had made expressing their own identity.

The final lines of the play are:

We are the children of the border.
Across borders
Without borders.

Sally finishes by saying:

Projects like this show how important the arts are as they give a space to understand the past, examine the present and consider our future, where we can see what connects us rather than divides us through the commonality of our experiences.

And while the relationships they formed may have been transient and of the moment, they have created memories [that] they will never forget.

We are focused on the past. We need to engage our young people politically. Some young people don't vote because the two main political parties don't represent them or what they care about.

They want a future that is full of hope and understanding. If we are going to have a conversation about what a shared island will look like, then we need to engage with our young people because it will be their country, not ours.

Indeed, the priorities of the young people, their hopes and dreams all seem a far cry from the bitterness of a divided Strabane District Council back in the 1980s.

Endnotes

- ¹ Leahy, P. (2023) 'Little interaction between people living North and South, new poll shows', *Irish Times*, 28 January. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/>
- ² Unwin, M. (2020) *Fermanagh: From Plantation to Peace Process*. Dublin: Eastwood Books.