

New Leaders, New Thinking,  
New Ireland and Northern Ireland

It is a real honour and such a personal privilege to accept this first Spirit of WIP award.

I want first of all to pay tribute to the Washington Ireland Program- a program that for me has made so many things possible. I was just 21 years old when I first boarded the plane to DC and what I learned that summer, and in the years since from the program, is more than I can really say.

It's hard to believe that 10 years ago I stood in this hotel and gave the Valedictorian speech on behalf of the class of 2005.

I remember that summer like it was yesterday- the pool parties the dress code, the "Red Line Shady Grove." The precious lifelong friends.

But when I look back on it- what I remember more than anything is the feeling of possibility, of opportunity and of optimism- the feeling that we as young people can be incredibly powerful.

I also remember that I virtually had no fear. The whole summer and the months that followed were like I was invincible and walking on air.

One of the things I remember saying in my valedictorian speech is that I hoped we would come back from the US and take a stand on things mattered.

That we would use the power given to us by our education, our experience, our time.

That we would try to forge ahead and build a better and a more just Ireland and Northern Ireland.

When I was in DC, I remember learning lots, as we all did, about leadership and in particular about different leadership styles.

I saw, for the first time, that a leader is not always the person who is up front, striding forward on their own- but, more often than not, the person who is at the centre, connected to and working with others: often quietly,

## Grainne Mellon WIP Remarks 2015

modestly and determinedly, to achieve something that really matters to them- that is personal.

Although many of us in this room, will tonight be reflecting on our past and our memories our summer in DC- we should also look to our future and ask: What needs to change in Ireland and Northern Ireland? What can we do?

What we will seek to change, of course, will depend on our individual values and passions.

For me, perhaps because of my work, I think of what can be done to create a just and more equal society.

I think of the leadership and the bravery shown by thousands of young people up and down the country, many of whom are WIP alums, in the Marriage Equality campaign.

I hope, and I know, that the young people of Northern Ireland will too take up the challenge of this historic battle for equality.

But another issue has also been on my mind particularly in recent weeks.

Amongst all the happy memories I have from my summer in DC are some that are more difficult.

In particular, I remember waking up, in the home of my host mum Megan in Virginia, to hear that London had been bombed in what we now know to be 7/7 bombings.

I remember watching the news over breakfast in silence and travelling, eventually that day to Capitol Hill where I was working in the office of Congressman Peter King, the then Chair of Homeland Security.

I remember following the debate in the US and elsewhere in the aftermath of 7/7- and noticing, for instance, the increased hostility to Muslims, a sense that racial profiling was acceptable, that restricting the rights of refugees was acceptable.

It turns out not much has changed: we are hearing the same debate in the aftermath of the vicious atrocities in Paris - the rhetoric, at least in part, that we should see whole groups of people as a threat to our way of life: whether it be our security, our culture, our economy.

This is not a new debate.

The same thing was said about and to Jewish communities fleeing Nazi terrors post WW2, it was said to Irish emigrants in America and in Britain particularly in the 70s and 80s, and it is said to other immigrant communities today.

It is also what is going on now when people are reluctant to afford the LGBT community the same rights as everyone else.

It is about calling people names and making them different to us. It is about stripping people of their basic humanity and it is about making us afraid.

To counter this narrative, I think we should speak up.

We should remember that if anyone can relate to leaving home, it should be us. If anyone can relate to what it's like to be a different in a strange country, it should be us.

We know, and have always known, what it is like to pack our bags and start a new life away from everything and everyone we know.

The Irish and Northern Irish have left these shores in droves- from boarding famine **ships in the 1800's**, to escaping the **Troubles in the 70's and 80's** to the quite different more recent emigration to places like Australia.

When we see the images of families grief-stricken in the Mediterranean, we know in the fibre of our history and in the fibre of our being, that we can reach out. That just as the world gave us a chance, and continues to give us chances, we too can do the same for others.

While we cannot solve the problem on our own, we can be a positive voice on the issue at a local or even a national level.

We can, for instance, say from our history, that you cannot use an atrocity like that in Paris, carried out in the name of a few, to penalise a whole people.

We can call out racism and rhetoric and say not in our name: not in our generation.

We can speak instead of fairness, equality and the protection of basic human rights.

These are some of things I think of when I think about the challenges facing Ireland and Northern Ireland. They were the issues that were on my mind when I came home from DC in 2005 and they are still on my mind tonight.

For others, your vision of what needs to change might be different.

It will, for instance, depend on your background, your values, your expertise.

One thing I do know and believe is that the old Ireland and the old Northern Ireland is on the way out.

The future is the creation of an outward looking, diverse and progressive island in which people are celebrated for who they are and in which people are equal regardless of their sexuality, their religion or where they were born.

My challenge to you tonight is to think of the one thing you most want to change about Ireland, North or South.

The one cause- big or small, local or national.

There only is one rule- and that is that it should not be something connected to the past- to what I call the old Ireland- it must be forward looking. It must be positive, not negative. And it must be something you can work with others on. When you talk about it, it should make you feel expansive and it should make you feel excited. When you think about doing something about it, it should make you feel proud.

Then, once **you've chosen it, think back to what you've learned about your own leadership style** and slowly take steps to make your change happen. Do it in your own way and your own style.

**Perhaps do one thing in the next week to start it. Perhaps don't try to start anything of significance tomorrow morning!**

More than anything, remember how you felt in Washington and treasure that feeling and that confidence always.

To quote the last words ever spoken by Seamus Heaney, important now more than ever in these uncertain times- remember:

***"Don't be afraid."***

GRAINNE MELLON  
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