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April 8, 2019

Ireland: A “Country on the Up”

During my semester abroad in Ireland, I have had the opportunity to meet a variety of students from across the world. I have been lucky enough to befriend a handful of Irish students, especially through the Drama Society. One of these students, Sinead Ryan, allowed me to interview her regarding her views and involvement in Irish culture. On the surface, there are many similarities between Ireland and the United States as was apparent in the interview. Having English as a common language is a major similarity. On an individual level, Sinead and I both say seafood is our favorite food, we both value the important people in our lives whether family or friends, we both enjoy the arts, and we share some similar views on the importance of higher education to personal growth. However, there are also differences in our lifestyles and cultural views that may reflect the societies we grew up in. For instance, Sinead goes home every weekend to see her family and work, a common trait among many of the Irish students I’ve met, and something neither I nor most of the students I know at Linfield do. We also connect with and understand our cultures differently. Sinead speaks Gaelic and is passionate about bringing the Irish language to the stage as a way to connect to her heritage and combat a recent history of imperialism, a task she is uniquely situated to pursue.

While there are many habits and lifestyle choices that are similar to what I experience in the U.S., there were also some surprises. The first highlighted in the interview, as I mentioned previously, are Sinead’s frequent trips home to work and see her family. I am used to working at school and only going home a few times a year, so Sinead explained a different understanding of her work and familial roles. Additionally, Sinead emphasized that one of her favorite parts of Ireland is the social culture. People go out frequently throughout the week, and she feels

comfortable striking up a conversation, asking for help, or offering warm hospitality, among friends and strangers. She loves the sense of community that brings, and it is carried out in a different way than the community building I have experienced in the U.S. If I am at a café in the U.S., my neighbor and I most likely will not begin chatting about the most recent rugby game, and I am far more likely to spend time with friends on the weekends when I have more free time. In my experience, socializing is largely designated among friends and acquaintances rather than a community custom.

One of the most interesting points Sinead shared was about her interpretation of Ireland as a country, and it shifted my perception of Ireland the most. She described Ireland as a country “on the up,” trying to make strides to overcome what she describes as an oppressive history of imperialism. She underscored art as a way to reclaim Irish heritage and make a name for Ireland on a global stage—indeed, Galway was named the 2020 European Capital of Culture, she informed me. Her viewpoint was a refreshing take considering the political stances the U.S. is taking, also in the name of reclaiming a cultural identity. My worldview has (hopefully) grown through my experience abroad and the anecdotes of people like Sinead who have grown up looking through a lens different from my own.