

How to Defuse a Bomb

The Leitrim Link

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In many ways, Denis and Miriam Mulcahy were typical of Irish immigrants arriving in the States in the sixties in search of a better future. Denis, a native of Rockchapel, Co Cork, arrived in 1962 and began working as a grave digger before joining the New York Police Department in 1969. Denis progressed rapidly through the ranks to eventually become a First Grade Detective with the elite bomb squad. He went on to have a highly decorated career earning numerous citations, including the Medal of Valor. Meanwhile, Miriam O'Rourke, native of Aghnasheelin, Co Leitrim, the second oldest of a family of twelve, left home at a very young age to help support her family. Miriam's first place of employment was Tullaghan, then she headed to England, before arriving in New York in 1962. She settled

Denis & Miriam Mulcahy PHOTO BY
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in the Bronx, found work with the New York Telephone Co and married Denis Mulcahy in 1967. The Mulcahy family moved to Greenwood Lake and appeared to be following the American dream. However, this typical-looking Irish couple would go on to have an extraordinary effect as events escalated in Northern Ireland.

In the early 1970s, the Mulcahys watched the nightly news broadcasts that depicted the dreadful scenes from Northern Ireland, as much of the province was engulfed in a cauldron of atrocities that included bombings, beatings, burnings, shootings and general mayhem that precipitated death, destruction, and despair. Sectarian strife was flourishing with all its attendant cultural toxicities as one community was pitted against another. It was a nightmarish existence for children as they were being brought up in an environment where sectarian violence was the norm, and the future looked dismal for this young, impressionable and vulnerable group. The 18th century Irish Whig Edmund Burke, a philosopher and political theorist, wrote that "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing", while John Stuart Mills, a 19th century philosopher, expressed a similar sentiment when he noted that "bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than good men should look on and do nothing". Fortunately, there were some good people who were not content to look on and do nothing. Two such people were Denis and Miriam Mulcahy. In 1975, with family members and friends from Greenwood Lake, New York, the Mulcahys established "Project Children". The basic premise of this organization was that there was another reality besides the sectarian mindset of hatred and bigotry that these youngsters were being enculturated into, and thus it was possible for Catholics and Protestants to live harmoniously side by side. The pro-

gram kicked off in '75 with six children, three from each side of the sectarian divide, spending the summer together with families in Greenwood Lake, New York. Though Neil Armstrong opined in '69 about the lunar mission being a giant step for mankind, the Mulcahy initiative in '75 was a major paradigm shift that would eventually become a template for the peace process. However, over the next four decades, over 23,000 children from war-torn Northern Ireland would cross the Atlantic to spend the summers with over 1,500 families all over the US. To say that the experience was life-changing for these youngsters would be a gross understatement, in fact, it may have been life-saving. In many ways the basic premise of Project Children set the scene for the iconic optic of once inveterate enemies, Martin McGuinness, and the Reverend Ian Paisley, sitting side by side in the Assembly, working for the common good.

In 2016, this inspiring story was chronicled in a documentary titled "How to Defuse a Bomb - The Project Children Story", which was directed by Des Henderson and narrated by Liam Neeson. The documentary has been aired by the BBC, RTE and in many local theatres in the US and Ireland. Currently, some schools are using the film as part of their history curriculum. One preview noted that "It's not often that we get to see ordinary people doing extraordinary things, but How to Defuse a Bomb shows us that and much more". Another preview aptly stated that the documentary tells the extraordinary untold story of how an NYPD bomb disposal expert and his organization played a key role in helping defuse the decades old Troubles in Northern Ireland. If a picture is supposed to be worth a thousand words, this caption, coupled with a bomb disposal expert and Project Children, will certainly be worth a chapter or two when the history of the Peace Process is finally written. Project Children

certainly steered many away either from being the victims or makers of bombs. Journalists and historians in the documentary unanimously agreed that Project Children became one of the most highly regarded and trusted organizations dealing with the North. Throughout the documentary glowing tributes are paid to Denis Mulcahy and Project Children by such political heavyweights as Bill Clinton, Martin McGuinness, John Hume, Councillor Joe Crowley, and George Mitchell among others. Indeed such was the stature of Denis that Bill Clinton co-opted him into his entourage as a confidant and he flew on Air Force One when Clinton made his initial foray into Northern Ireland politics. Indeed the Mulcahys have been guests of the Clintons when they were in the White House. Over the years, Denis has garnered a very impressive and lengthy array of accolades, some of which are: the Benemerenti Medal from Pope John Paul II, the Top Cop Award from Vice-President Al Gore, the ABC News Person of the Week, Dublin's Person of the Year, the Cardinal Cooke Right to Life Award from John Cardinal O'Connor, an OBE from Queen Elizabeth, the Presidential Distinguished Award from President Michael D Higgins and a number of Honorary Doctorates. In addition, Denis was also nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize but was pipped by Nelson Mandela and Mother Theresa.

While Denis was the face and the voice of Project Children, Miriam was at the hub and command center, which was the Mulcahy residence in Greenwood Lake. Besides rearing her four children, Miriam was responsible for the myriad arrangements involving the visiting children and their respective host families. In the early days of the organization most of the contacts were via mail, as modern means of communication were still in the future, and house phones were not ubiquitous. While the well-hackneyed expression proclaims that behind every successful man is a successful woman, that certainly is a truism in this instance. While Denis was the head of Project Children, Miriam was the heartbeat. Miriam received the Emerald Award from the mayor of Atlantic City, and he proclaimed a "Miriam Mulcahy Day" in recognition of her contribution to Project Children. In the aftermath of the Good Friday agreement and relative peace returning to Northern Ireland, the original format of Project Children has been discontinued. However, it has been replaced with an internship program that places university students with companies in the United States through the summer months. This year the Mulcahys are involved in a new venture. The Mulcahy family in association with the Irish Aisling Center announced that they will be funding annual scholarships for American High School students to



the Celtic Irish American Academy in Galway. The school's mission is to engage the students in an intellectually stimulating and deeply enriching experience while exploring their Irish heritage, literature, culture, sport and the intertwined history of both countries. The scholarship will be known as the "Mulcahy Scholarship". This is a very fitting tribute to the Mulcahy family, who for forty years provided temporary respite to Northern Ireland children.

The adage that individuals can make a difference is often bandied about more in hope rather than in certitude. Well the Mulcahys certainly made a difference, and although the documentary "How to Defuse a Bomb — The Project Children Story" attempts to tell this inspiring story, their contribution to the Peace Process can never be fully measured. The Mulcahys and Project Children brought a reprieve from the intrinsic sectarian violence, and a hope that Catholics and Protestants could coexist peacefully in Northern Ireland. In the final analysis that may have been the difference between life and death.



In June 1975 the first Project Children group left for America. Nine year old Kevin Brady and John Cheevers (11) were young boys from either side of a divided Belfast, the first time they had ever met someone of a different tradition was when they met each other on the very first Project Children flight.

COURTESY RTE