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Alumnus Dugan Flanders '11 serves as Young Cultural Ambassador

Summary: The program is designed to promote a greater understanding of the shared cultural heritage of Northern Ireland in North America.

(October 11, 2011)-University of Minnesota, Morris alumnus Dugan Flanders '11, Paynesville, served as a Young Ambassador in Northern Ireland through the Friends of Saint Patrick organization and the Saint Patrick Centre. The program is designed to promote “a greater understanding of the shared cultural heritage of Northern Ireland in North America among those aged 20–25.” The program aims to establish a network of informed and influential individuals throughout North America who can actively represent the northern part of Ireland throughout their lives.

For three weeks in June 2011, Flanders, along with six other young adults from the United States and Canada, visited Northern Ireland. The program sends young people to County Down, Northern Ireland, in order to learn about Northern Irish culture, with emphasis on the peace and reconciliation process. Each Young Ambassador designs his or her own project, based on individual experience and expertise, to examine a certain part of the culture for their “cultural assignment.”

For his cultural assignment, Flanders studied cultural change and development, specifically the existence of multiple cultures found within Northern Ireland.

“I worked extensively with the Ulster-Scots Agency to study the history of Ulster Scots culture and to examine continuity and change within that culture to better understand how its existence influences the peace and reconciliation process,” says Flanders.

For his studies, Flanders traveled throughout Northern Ireland, visiting different towns and meeting with different people each day, from ordinary people to public officials.

“On one day, I would have tea with First Minister Peter Robinson and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness at Stormont [Northern Ireland’s Parliament],” says Flanders, “and on another, I would be discussing culture and history with local farmers in front of Killyleagh Castle [a small port town on Strangford Lough].”

Flanders learned of the Young Ambassador opportunity when Morris Associate Professor of Art History Jimmy Schryver recommended that he apply for it.

“Another former UMM student, Ryan Barland '08, had been an ambassador the year before, and he asked Professor Schryver if he knew of any students who would be interested in the program,” says Flanders. “After filling out the application, I went through the interview process in the cities and was awarded a place as one of Minnesota’s Young Ambassadors for the year.”

After three weeks in Northern Ireland, Flanders then worked at various cultural fairs, such as the Milwaukee Irish

Festival, on weekends for the rest of the summer. The fairs included panel discussions and presentations.

Flanders expects his participation in the Young Ambassadors Program to have a large positive impact on his future. “I am still in regular contact with all of this year’s Young Ambassadors, and with the people I worked with in Northern Ireland. I now have many contacts in various places in Northern Ireland, and have discussions regarding some of the current renewable energy development efforts occurring today in Northern Ireland with those contacts. Even though it was not my field of study within the Young Ambassador Program, I was able to have quite a few discussions about renewable energy with business developers while I was there. I worked with renewable energy research projects fairly extensively while at UMM, and I am hoping that the connections I made while with the Young Ambassadors program might lead to future visits to Northern Ireland and perhaps even a career there.”

Flanders says he has cultivated many close friendships with people he would never have met otherwise without the program.

“Those friendships have been cemented for life thanks to the experiences we had together in Northern Ireland.”

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