

Grosse Ile native commits his soul to youth in embattled Northern Ireland

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BY NEAL RUBIN Free Press Staff Writer

Jamie Treadwell has a friend who had a wife whose parents owned a fish-and-chip shop in Belfast.

The Irish Republican Army thought Protestant loyalists were meeting above the restaurant, and it blew the building to sawdust. As it turned out, there was no meeting, but the woman and her parents were dead just the same.

Live in Northern Ireland long enough and the Troubles will hit close to home. They will also become absurdly routine. The British soldiers walking the streets with machine guns, the odd explosion -- "It just kind of mingles with everyday life," Treadwell says.

Born into privilege in Grosse Ile, he arrived in west Belfast 10 years ago to teach children that bombs and bullets don't win hearts and minds. With a handful of other Christians from a group called Sword of the Spirit, he founded a cross-denominational program called Youth Initiatives.

This is not a movie-of-the-week, where Catholic and Protestant children wind up romping in a field while their parents join hands and reflect on the folly of their ways. This is Northern Ireland, where a car bomb in a small town called Omagh killed 28 people only two months ago.

But Treadwell and his associates do bring Catholics and Protestants together sometimes, and they do turn some aimless teenagers into leaders, and they do it with -- and for -- next to nothing.

Their tools are soccer balls and camp stoves and stage lights and, of course, faith. Their lessons are tolerance and responsibility. Slowly, carefully, they have become part of the community -- not preaching to it, but working within it, fighting to turn potential brigands into peacemakers.

The brothers of the Sword live plainly and communally, sharing their limited resources and boundless devotion. Treadwell, 40, owns four pairs of pants, nine shirts and a 10-year-old charcoal suit he wore in lieu of a tuxedo when he met Prince Charles at a politician's garden party a few years ago.

As director of Youth Initiatives, he earns a small salary that he turns over to the brotherhood. Like the four other brothers and two trainees in their 150-year-old row house, he draws a \$12 weekly allowance.

Everyone in Sword of the Spirit is celibate, though they don't like to use the term. "Living single for the Lord," they say. In all ways, they try to bring themselves closer to God and one another.

"A big part of our life is simplicity," Treadwell says. "I find a real freedom in that."

HE HAS ALWAYS been a competitor, with his greatest opponent himself. At Grosse Ile High School, he was valedictorian and the golf champion of the Huron League. At the University of Michigan, he ran a marathon, just to prove he could. The first summer he worked at a YMCA camp near Traverse City, he won the award for best rookie counselor.

Back in Grosse Ile on vacation last month, he told funny stories about motoring in Belfast, about the narrow streets and the time he absent-mindedly grabbed a car knob

with his right hand instead of his left and it turned out to be the door handle. In truth, he prefers driving there because it's more athletic and more difficult.

"I tend to take on personal challenges," he says. Youth Initiatives has been the greatest, and also the most satisfying, because he has learned as much as he has taught.

Some of the lessons have been practical. In a city where joyriding is all but a recognized hobby, a chain wrapped around the steering wheel works better than the Club.

Some have been less definable. He has come to know that in Belfast, nothing is simple except his lifestyle.

In the battle for souls, for instance, the thugs who blow up fish-and-chip shops are his competitors.

They are also his allies.

THE LADS WERE sniffing glue, which is even cheaper than beer. For lack of anything more amusing, they decided to bust up the Sword of the Spirit van. When the missionary in the van objected, they busted him up a bit, too.

Once the story got around, the men Treadwell refers to as "the local enforcers" had a chat with the glue-sniffers. The teenage rowdies tapped on the row house door and apologized.

"You read between the lines," Treadwell says, "and that's acceptance by the IRA. They're saying, 'This is good work, and someone needs to do it.' "

Youth Initiatives sponsors drama programs, giving 15- to 18-year-olds the chance to write, produce and act in plays. It holds camp-outs and runs sports programs, provides study halls and offers leadership training.

Every Wednesday night, 50 to 100 people from 12 to 25 meet to sing, share, pray and celebrate life in a government housing project with 75 percent unemployment.

Poleglass and nearby Twinbrook house 17,000 people. Nearly half the residents are younger than 25, and 60 percent of the children are being raised by a single parent.

Together, the two projects hold exactly three Protestant families. The rest are Roman Catholic. The one thing most of them had in common 10 years ago was unpromising: They didn't trust the Yanks.

"There was a lot of concern about our agenda," Treadwell says. Other Americans had come before, offering unrealistic quick fixes or trying to convert the masses. Some priests and ministers told him bluntly to stay away from their kids and out of their schools.

Fortunately, a few priests bucked the tide. "You work here and just go for it," one said. Treadwell and another brother did spadework for two full years, building up visibility and credibility, then began Youth Initiatives.

In short order, they had hundreds of kids involved in programs that have continued to grow. Counting their annual carnival in July, they touch thousands of children and young adults annually, from the hordes on their playing fields to the half-dozen who volunteer in a Romanian orphanage.

A year after the founding, one of the ministers who had tried to chase him away came by to apologize.

"We had nothing to lose," Treadwell says. He's an Episcopalian, which makes him a Protestant, but his foremost identity is American. That and his message -- be responsible, love one another, love Christ -- ultimately made him welcome.

"The way he talks to you, you're part of his family," says Tony Silcock, one of Youth Initiatives' success stories.

Silcock, 21, joined a soccer program five years ago. Swept up in the prayer groups and leadership programs, he's working in East Lansing for University Christian Outreach after a summer of mission work in Highland Park.

"I wasn't as bad as some of the other kids," Silcock says, but he wasn't going anywhere, either. "I got called at the right time. Jamie Treadwell has made a difference for me and many others in Belfast. Many, many others."

Treadwell is busy but attentive, Silcock says. Quick-witted, but serious. If Treadwell hasn't seen someone around for awhile, he'll call. He always remembers their last conversation. He'll share a funny story, but when the situation demands it, "he's a very stern guy."

"When he sets his mind on something, he'll put all he has into it. He'll bleed himself dry."

THE TREADWELLS went to church every Sunday. "It wasn't a question of whether you'd stayed out late," says Marjorie Treadwell, Jamie's mother. "You went to school Monday, you went to church Sunday."

Jamie, the fifth of six children, always liked it. Tall, slender, athletic and popular, he served as an acolyte and played in the bell choir. Then, in college, his faith swept him away.

A fine arts major at U-M, he still creates wonderful pastel landscapes in a closet the brothers converted to a studio. His originals pump \$500 to \$800 apiece into the Youth Initiatives budget.

An arts college in Seattle offered him a teaching job after graduation, and he had to decide: Would he take a job, or a vow?

The answer made his mother cry. "What about that poor wife you're not going to marry?" she asked.

Today, with her little boy grown and established, "he's one of the happiest people I know," she says. "He's doing what he was supposed to do. It's a very full life."

She still had doubts after her first visit to Belfast, when she reached to open his car door and he hollered, "Mom! Don't touch that!" But she has grown used to his ascetic life and her role in it. The last three tablecloths in the Belfast row house have been presents from her.

The brothers pray together in the morning, before dinner and at bedtime. They eat together, suffering the expensive and limited Irish diet with Christian civility. They share bedrooms and thoughts in a house with no television.

"You don't need to spend a lot of money to have a good craic," he says. A craic is a lively conversation, a good laugh. The expression is one of many from Belfast that have crept into his speech.

"Home is where he is. It's hard for a mother to realize that," says Marjorie Treadwell.

Jamie Treadwell misses his family and he loves coming home, where he can look out the back window and see trees instead of cement. But when he is in Grosse Ile, playing golf and spoiling his nieces and nephews, he misses his friends and his programs and his kids.

There are frustrations, yes. Youth Initiatives' headquarters, surrounded by fences and barbed wire, is an old poolhouse the city abandoned after some bored kids set the oil furnace on fire. Volunteers scraped the soot away, but "if you fix something up, it's going to get ripped apart. It's essentially a lawless environment."

Youth work is difficult by nature. The average career span, he says, is a year or two. Counting three years in England and his training before that, he's well into his second decade.

"I don't have as much energy as I used to," he says, "but I'm a much better youth worker." And he still loves the triumphant rush that reminds him he is in the right place.

A year ago, a 19-year-old Protestant girl in Youth Initiatives died. It was a car wreck, not a bomb. Treadwell and three dozen of the older kids got together after the funeral, arranging themselves around the tables in a pub.

"Look around the room," said a Catholic boy. Some of the mourners were workers, some students, some chronically unemployed. "I could go to any of these little groups," he said, "and be totally at home."

Praise the Lord, Treadwell thought. It's working.

JAMIE TREADWELL

- Age: 40
- Home: Belfast, Northern Ireland
- Education: B.A., fine arts, University of Michigan; valedictorian at Grosse Ile High School.
- Occupation: Director of Youth Initiatives, a cross-denominational youth group. Manages 12 full-time staffers and 30 volunteers. One of 40 members of Sword of the Spirit missionary organization active in seven countries.
- Personal: Parents are Don and Marjorie Treadwell of Grosse Ile. Fifth of six tall, trim and successful children.
- Talents: One of few foreigners elected by fellow artists to the Irish Pastel Society. Trumpeter in U-M marching and concert bands. Most valuable player on high school tennis and golf teams.
- Observation: "Everything Jamie ever did," says his mother, "he had to do as well as he possibly could."