

YMCA 175 - Oral History
Recording Transcript
Ivan McMahon

National Secretary - YMCA Ireland



Ian: My name is Ian McKenzie and I'm here with Ivan McMahon, pronounced correctly? And Scott McKenzie and we're down in Dublin, Ireland and the date is Tuesday 28th of May 2019. We're recording some oral history of YMCA in Ireland and for part of the YMCA 175 event later this year.

So Ivan thanks first for agreeing to go on the record and record some of your personal experience and involvement with YMCA so we're really keen to hear I guess where you started and how it started for you.

Ivan: Sure, thanks Ian, it's good to be here and share some of my personal story and memories of this organisation. I suppose my first induction to the YMCA was back in the early 70s as a 16 year old coming from Donegal which is up the north west of the country to Cork city with a part of a church team and being asked to give or share my faith story at something called the 8.30 and 8.30 I subsequently discovered is a very very important part of the YMCA story in Ireland in that it tended to, I think in all YMCAs that grew up in Ireland had this meeting on Sunday evenings after most people had gone perhaps to two church services there was this ecumenical gathering that we would call today an interdenominational place where people from all sorts of faith backgrounds would gather and find some sort of unity in the YMCA. I was amazed because as a 16-year-old, I had never been asked to share my faith story in a church environment before, I was very nervous and yet I was just amazed that these people took a risk with me. And that's been I suppose my experience of the organisation ever since that's it's about risks and it's great to see how that's reflected today with how we provide opportunity for young people to step out of their comfort zone and take risks in different ways whether that's in public speaking, whether that's in leadership, whether that's in community service. That was my first recollection of the YMCA, way back in the early 70s.

Ian: And do you remember that day vividly or is it a memory sort of?

Ivan: I do remember it vividly because of the smells in the room. YMCAs were always very, it seemed to me, took a lot of pride in their buildings. And I remember to this day the smell of linoleum was highly polished and I also remember, a lovely old gentleman at the door welcoming me with a rose and I thought this is a very strange place but those two smells stay with me. So it isn't just a memory I've come up with but it is stuck with me over the years.

I suppose fast forward, my next engagement with the YMCA, I was asked, I was a research student in the University of College Cork and I was asked to do some research for Cork YMCA. They had basically come to a hiatus in their traditional work and they felt there was a need to look at new needs in the community. And so national council YMCAs found some small bit of money from the National Youth Work organisation or Department of Education as it was in those days to do some research and I was commissioned to do I think it was a three-month piece of research around the needs of unemployed young people. Which I did and I submitted it and about six or nine months later, the National Council of YMCAs with at that stage the acting national secretary was a guy called John Duncan and came back to Cork YMCA with some funding that they got on the basis of the

research that I'd done to look at setting up a drop in centre for the young people in Cork. The job was advertised, I went for it, it was a youth worker/general secretary. Initially I said no, I didn't feel it was for me, the interview panel came back and said we'll give you three days to think about it, I did, I'd a couple of interesting conversations with people. I came back and said OK, I'm not sure I've got all the skills but if you feel I've got some of the skills then I'm prepared to take a risk for it was a one-year contract and that was in March 1984.

So for the next 5 years I worked as youth worker general secretary and really was about establishing the YMCA in Cork. Interestingly, when I started I had to spend three weeks as part of my induction in Belfast YMCA, at that stage Joe Campbell was the youth worker in charge. And I spent three weeks just shadowing him and immersing myself in the particular style of youth work that was happening in the city of Belfast, which at that stage was in Wellington Place in the city centre and was a wonderful experience, heavy duty stuff in terms of the type of young people we were working with and yet the way in which our, the faith of the staff and the volunteers was reflected in the love and acceptance of the young people. And as a part of that I spent some time visiting Bangor YMCA, Carrickfergus YMCA; it was interesting Carrickfergus YMCA at the time had a thing called Youth Enquiry Service which had been imported from Scotland, I thought this was a really interesting model of youth information as it became later known and that was one of the ideas I brought back to Cork which we subsequently introduced in Cork YMCA. I suppose that sense of being a part of an organisation that wasn't just local it was a national organisation, so from my very early days I felt yes I'm employed as part of the Cork YMCA but I'm part of a national movement. And that's been very important to me ever since and indeed after that when I discovered that it was a bigger organisation, the international organisation. I was thinking back to, I think it was one of my first meetings of the national board we had in those days; it was in Portadown YMCA must of been late 1984, YMCA Ireland, National Council of YMCA Ireland had only broken from Great Britain and Ireland up until then there was a single National Council but 1982/83 I think it split and Ireland became independent. So that was an interesting experience of being in a room with hundreds of years of experience between them being the newbie in town feeling really uncomfortable, my lack of knowledge, my lack of experience and yet I suppose it was still a very warm environment where you're ok to ask questions and asking questions is how you grew and learnt things. It's been another important part of this organisation, we're prepared to hopefully embrace newcomers and we don't become a clique.

So that international, that national has always been a part of my experience and there's lots of different examples of that over the subsequent years but I think it's one of the strengths we have and certainly within an Irish context the fact that we work all island basis on National Council is quite a unique feature for our organisation as far as I know we are the only National council of YMCAs in the world that encompasses two jurisdictions and that presents lots of challenges but I also believe presents lots of opportunities for us as something certainly in my time in senior management is something I've been very passionate and tried to maintain those links and nurture those links so we can learn from each other. In an Irish context there aren't many opportunities for people north and south to develop real deep friendships where you can really get underneath the surface and get to know people and explore sensitive issues. That has been I suppose an important part of this movement, vitality and how it has remained relevant in that it has been reared to go into places where others have been reluctant to go. An example of that was in the 1990s we got involved in a whole experience called 'Crossings' which is about trying to explore what it means to be an anti-sectarian organisation on this island. I think that was one of the most formative experiences in my professional and personal journey in this organisation,

but I think the Crossings journey was quite profound because it got us into a space where, as I said earlier the old 8.30 which brought together people from various church traditions mostly from the Protestant church traditions I have to say but in the 90s when we began to look at how do we position ourselves, what is our mission in a modern Ireland we went back into this whole area of diversity and how can we become an inclusive organisation. There were so many, a number of residential where people from a whole range of different faith backgrounds. I remember a lovely lady who is still with us, Kitty Delay from Bantry, a catholic lady who has very strong personal faith and her being able to sit down at a residential weekend with a Free Presbyterian from Ballymena and that was, and she still talks about this, it was an amazing opportunities she's ever had. Out of that journeying together discovering that behind the label we had real very important things in common. That was around faith and justice that we were being called not just to speak about God's love to show God's love in actual terms in people's lives. Which wasn't easy. We had lots of people who had lots of issues. But I think it was the pace if it and the inclusive nature and the fact there were potential opportunities created to develop real relationships brought us to a place where I think we were the first organisation to become an anti-sectarian on the island. And that has remained very close to my own personal journey because of the faith background I come from and it tends to be quite exclusive and quite closed so I had to journey myself and question some of my own assumptions about faith and theology and that can be an uncomfortable lace but because it happened in the context of relationship where it was a safe space it just transformed me as a person and I suppose that my own personal story but I can see how in lots of staff and young people's lives that come in contact with this organisation. This isn't about some sort of a professional engagement and you just go home more or less the same person you started that day. You go home transformed in terms of your theology, but also in how you view people, how you view society and how you view the injustices of society. So this organisation really impacts the whole person. So the whole body, mind and spirit is the heart of it, I can testify that it is, it reaches parts that other organisations don't reach. And sometimes I think that is something we need to be proud of, celebrate and be humble, that's a huge responsibility that we have as an organisation.

Ian: Amazing, incredible and even just hearing those stories of transformation of individuals and though relationship is something that continues to happen even for people like myself that are relatively new to the organisation and I know we use the word journey quite a lot, especially in a country like ours but it very much takes you on a journey that is unexpected and also embracing at the same time because it does bring you to spaces and places with people that otherwise would be unavailable. So really interesting, really interesting. In terms of the north and the south and even as you're talking about that particular piece of work, are there any pieces' other work that would have similar traits of the impact of the YMCA and its place in it?

Ivan: Yes, I think another important expression of our cooperation north and south was called Bridge of Hope. Bridge of Hope was a major initiative in the mid-1980s, and again a sort of a cameo of how this organisation as part of a wider organisation benefits from those linkages. Ireland in the 80s, early 80s, mid 80s, was north and south was a pretty dismal place for young people, not only did we have huge issues of violence in Northern Ireland but throughout north and south unemployment was high, 30/40% youth unemployment in parts. throughout the YMCA certainly in Cork, Carrickfergus, North Down, Bangor and Belfast would have started to experiment with drop in centres as a place where young people could at least get some headspace away from home play some pool, play some table tennis, plays some darts whatever it might be as a way to relieve boredom, meet friends hopefully interact with YMCA volunteers and staff. But it became quite clear for

some of us that the drop in approach, while it was useful for many of these young people that were caught in almost a cul-de-sac in that they couldn't find any way out of this unemployment cycle that they were in. Many of them had left school early, many of them had poor or low levels of education, many of them had issues around authority or dealing with justice, health issues and they weren't able to access many of the training interventions that were around both north and south of the island. A former national secretary at the time, a guy called Cyril McIlhinney originally from Donegal like myself, he met with the general secretary, the CEO of Chicago YMCA, a guy called John Casey, at a European YMCA event I think it was in Helsinki's but not 100% sure about that but they struck up a conversation. John Casey was a first generation Irishman, he was at that stage CEO of the worlds largest YMCA, had a passion for Ireland, carried an Irish passport, he was very proud of his Irish heritage and very much in touch with what was going on in Ireland and knew he pain of unemployment from his own family background. Cyril and he got into conversation and said look, how we use the expertise of the YMCA in Chicago, the YMCA USA around, how can we help Ireland and Irish YMCA. Out of that came a commitment from John to find resources to help fund a major research study into the effects of youth unemployment in the north and south and this was given the title Bridge of Hope. And that title was carefully chosen, it was because central to the YMCA was the notion of hope and it really was this idea that we were a bridge, a bridge north and south, to be a bridge between different resources; so it was a well thought through term. It was the first major study that was carried out in both parts of the island, there were bits in the north and bits in the south but looked at similarities and were similar which is not surprising. And that was carried out by a lady called Clare Curry and that was an important piece of work because out of that research came a second part of how do we respond as a YMCA given our strengths and the fact we know these young people they aren't just abstract, these are real live young people we knew whether it was in Belfast or in Cork or wherever. And that led to a number of interventions, a few of them were called Interchange, Interchange was a program trying to use YMCA overseas, in UK and America and in Canada to find work placements for young people. One of the issues we found from the research was that there was a lack of quality of work experience or so many unemployed young people they couldn't find quality work experience so how do we find those opportunities for young people using international contacts. There were links with Norwich and with Chicago and with Estes Park and there was one in Canada as well, I can't remember the name. So that was one program. Another issue we identified was that there were a number of young people leaving Ireland to go to the UK who had made no preparation, so just the name of a friend on the back of a cigarette packet. That was a very common experience so we said Look how can we use the YMCA network to a - prepare the young people in Cork before leaving and then to make some contact with them when they're in London. So that led to a program called Youth Mobility and so we had links with a number of YMCAs in the London area, Romford and Wimbledon area in particular and that was just a great example of how the YMCA could harness those linkages and that network for the benefit of young people. And so we had 100s of young people who benefited from that over the years. The third main part of that Bridge of Hope initiative was called Steps - support, training, enterprise program. That was piloted in Cork and in Belfast in 1988. That tried to provide a holistic range of supports to young people and that proved to be a very successful pilot and we were able to access European Social Fund monies here in the Republic and in the north for a period. It lasted in the Republic and is still going on 31 years later. It's evolved and grown but it tries to work with each young person has the hour trying to create a career plan and address the obstacles in their lives that prevents them accessing training and employment. And again that suite of stuff came out of that international contact and is an example of how we have benefited from being part of an international movement and how north and south certainly surging the first three or four

years of that program we would regular conferences for staff involved to share learning and that was a really important way of building bridge north and south.

Ian: And a big part of YMCA is obviously relationships that are formed over years and often through unexpected happenings or interactions. Have you any, I'm sure you've made friends through the years of your time at YMCA, have any been significant for you or has there been any that have carried on over time that are still were maybe formed years previously or would you have anything to share?

Ivan: That's a good question, absolutely. I think it's that opportunity the YMCA creates for fellowship and engaging around issues and I suppose it's easy when you're at the cold faze to get caught up in the problems and issues you're presented with. You go at an international level you begin to get a fresh perspective on your homework. That to me, I keep saying to staff, travelling to his conference or that conference but in the journey to that place with colleagues it opens up conversations. It opens up the most exciting, stimulating conversations I've had have been those journeys to the actual event. Even though lots of memories of linkages with Yugandof (?) in Germany in the early 90s and long train journeys across Germany with colleagues. and some of them were really formative for new staff joining, for those of us who worked together for a few years' bye case they helped us to find true north again. It's very easy to get diverted and those journeys and as well as the conference or event you may be travelling to were important absolutely but not only do you see things from an Irish perspective but you see things from a German perspective or Swiss perspective and you begin to relate this organisation is so diverse, we are unique in that we respond to needs of our young people in different ways, we're not McDonalds. We are an amazing organisation who are locally driven yet we say we are nationally significant and that's a part of our uniqueness in that we are about responding to needs in Londonderry or in Donegal or in Cork and those young people's needs are different and we are able to respond appropriately to those needs. So to go back to your question, lots of memories of conversations and they've been important keeping us focused and what we're about. It's easy to get diverted by funders agendas and other people's agendas but I think it's that fellowship, that sense of colleagues questioning you, challenging you, being able to force you to articulate why you're doing it this way brings clarity to one's practice, one's thinking process. And I think that's again we take pride in the Irish YMCA in being learning organisation is about being able to learn from our mistakes and able to learn from things we get wrong, we are far from perfect and to quote from an English YMCA that we are far from being a perfect organisation but by the grace of God we continue to struggle to become what we might become. I think that to me gives me great pride to be part of an organisation that can put up their hands and say I think we got it wrong there, let's think about what we can learn from that situation. In that situation it creates space for staff and our volunteers to take risks and goes back to my earlier comment that this is an important theme in Ireland. We are prepared to take risks for young people.

Ian: Tell us a little bit about your role now as National Secretary - how did you end up in that role, how long have you been working in that role and what do you see in terms of the organisation has been some of the significant things that have happened in your time?

Ivan: I've been in this role just over two and half years, I took over from Steven Turner. I'd been deputy National Secretary here from 2000 - 2016, I suppose it's been an amazing privilege to be in this role and to work based in the republic but covering the whole island, that makes the job doubly difficult, doubly challenging but also really exciting because I think it's being able to learn from colleagues in the north and hopefully they may learn

something from our experiences in the republic so in being able to move north and south and working at a close level with staff it's been an amazing opportunity. Working with the senior staff team working with both parts of the island and our General Secretaries who meet four times a year on an all island basis. They're really an enriching experience. It's been such a privilege being part of those teams; learning from each other, challenging each other, and understanding that behind the politics and differences there are so many similarities and that together we are committed to the same ideals and the same principles. And that there's an amazing, in spite of the different types of programs we operate and in terms of our model of how we interact with young people and the importance we see in including young people in our decision making, there's an equal commitment north and south. And so in spite of perhaps our political context where there is potential for greater divergence in the future, there's a real opportunity for the YMCA to journey closer and closer together so we can learn from each other and be counter cultural because I think in an Irish context, where there's no political agenda, we can learn from each other as neighbours; that's a very powerful statement. And that goes right back, Dublin YMCA recently the general secretary shared a picture of one of these lovely gilded framed pictures of very serious looking men, about 24 of them, the all-Ireland General Secretaries being held in Dublin YMCA in 1922. In 1922 in Ireland, the free state had just been formed, it was the first year of our independence as a nation, the republic was a year after the partition of our island. The YMCA, that was quite a courageous thing for those General Secretaries north and south to do. It was making a statement that we predated the border, we were here since 1849 and we are beyond the border. And that really inspired me when I saw this picture, it reignited that passion, about trying to create a space for people to feel comfortable where there isn't a political agenda and can learn to share from each other. So that's been a really privileged part of it. The other thing is seeing our young people even in this building. A few Saturdays ago we had a meeting of our fledgling Youth Forum and here we heard the stories of young people as they shared their experiences of our organisation from very different contexts but there were common threads and languages emerging. And they made a presentation to the Executive at the end of it. Sometimes at a governance level you wonder, yes governance is about compliance and it's all very important in the modern world but I thought it was a lovely picture of how our trustees and directors of the company were able to hear from young people and their experiences of the organisation and was just a very powerful moment where you could of heard pin drop. They were in awe of what these young people were saying and made their work hopefully, brought added value to their work that putting in place all the important governance structures are there for a reason but ultimately we are about serving young people and I suppose that's what kept me fresh in the organisation for the last 35 years that it is about keeping young people's needs as the focus.

Ian: And just for the sake of the recording, we're in the Irish Bible Institute building here in Foley Street in Dublin. What about the links with organisations such as this organisation; I understand its used quote a bit or has been and is there, does the YMCA in Ireland have strong links with other organisations, is there any over the years that have been significant?

Ivan: Yes, we meet her for a number of reasons, it's very convenient to train stations and that's the primary reason we meet here. But meeting here we've got to know a little bit about their work and that's been valuable. Yes, there's always a danger with the YMCA that because of our scale we become a bit of an island mentality that we reach a certain scale where we don't need other organisations. And that's a risk, that's a danger to the YMCA. We can argue that the international links counterbalance that but I'm always a great believer in having organic links with our local organisations whether that's around

health, mental health, substance misuse, or might be we don't have all the answers to work independently from others. In terms of significant organisations, we work with certainly over the last number of years we've worked with especially with Corymeela and I think it's been an interesting journey and some of their issues around how do we become better at advocating for causes and particular in our case for and with young people. I think it's a real challenge for us as we move forward in how we engage young people in campaigning and lobbying issues, not using them as a way to promote the YMCA but how do we enable young people to be passionate defenders of causes they believe in.

Ian: And what is Corymeela? Tell us a little bit more about it in terms of it as an organisation.

Ivan: Corymeela is a residential Centre and more based in the north coast of Ireland near Ballycastle. And very much committed to breaking down the barriers between Catholics and Protestants and has a very long history of peace building and is well regarded in many quarters of the island north and south.

Ian: And so then finally, unless you have any other significant branches that we want to explore but in terms of where the YMCA is at present and into the next 10 years, in terms of what we've talked about, in terms of its engagement in the community with people north and south, in terms of the relevant issues of the times what is the future of the YMCA like from this present date?

Ivan: Good question. I think the YMCA is well placed to play a really exciting role in both local communities and at a national level for a number of reasons. I think we have managed to keep that as an organisation we are being driven by a belief in justice and faith that we are clear about why we are doing what we are doing. I think we have managed to create safe spaces where people from different backgrounds can come together despite the labels and that they feel at home in the YMCA. I think we have an am in staff and volunteer teams in all our YMCAs who give so much of themselves and I think it's incredible to see their commitment to young people. I think all those ingredients mean we are well placed as it will become challenging as both the north and south become more secular in society. I think the faith voice is going to be drummed out by other competing voices and that's ok. We have a role to play in both challenging society and challenging the churches about justice. I feel that we are at a time where in other countries societies have moved from being so called Christian societies to secular societies and the church has become marginalised, I think there is a real opportunity for the YMCA and in partnership with other faith based organisations to become more vocal in the public space about the intersect between faith, justice and action. I think that's one challenge for us, I think that the other challenge for us is how do we resource our work going forward. There's going to be a need to find new models of funding and how do we do that without compromising the integrity of our work. And the third challenge is how do we engage young people in decision making in this organisation. There's a real push from many of our funders to move towards very business based models of decision making where you have experts making decisions. I came from a meeting today where a funder has said they don't trust young people to be involved in directing a company and that's a really frightening thought as a youth organisation if this is a funder saying this on a public record. So we've got to find ways, meaningful ways of engaging young people in decision making and that's going to be a challenge for us. We have some small examples, I think we have some stuff in the city of Belfast YMCA in their youth and government and in the republic through an initiative called Comhairle na nÓg, who are regional youth councils where I think we have some real expertise in our organisation and I think I see the germ of some ideas that may

feed into a process that will really led into young people really engaging cos this organisation if it loses sight of the young people and loses sight of why we do what we do then we become an organisation that's lost its way.

Ian: Thank you so much, not really great and exciting as you say challenging but exciting and I think YMCA is uniquely placed. Do you have any additions to our interview here today?

Ivan: No. I think it's great to be part of this process and obviously the 175th anniversary of the organisation is amazing and in fact in Ireland it's the 170th anniversary of the formation of the first YMCA in Dublin which is about 3 or 4 km from here. Well there's actually a regional formation which is only a km from here, Dublin is the second oldest YMCA in the world. So that's story to be told as well and celebrated as well as the regional foundation but again how the YMCA found its way from London to Dublin and within 5 short years is an interesting one which I think needs further exploration but probably is a reflection of the time when which Dublin was a part of the so called empire was the second city which was a sign of its importance as a city in terms of that. So I look forward to hearing some people trying to tell that story.

Ian: Well thank you so much and thank you Scott for helping us out today and Ivan I really appreciate it.

Ivan: Thank you

Recorded on:

Tuesday 28th May 2019

Dublin, Ireland

By Ian McKenzie - YMCA Carrickfergus