

## A Lasting Foundation

By Sister Lena Deevy LSA, IIC Founding Member and Executive Director (1991–2013)

Congratulations, IIC, on your 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. It is an inspiring and hard-won achievement.

As I enjoy a busy “retirement” back in Ireland, I’d like to share a few reflections from my 25 years with IIC. It is only looking back from this distance that I can truly see the uniqueness of what we accomplished, and I am so proud of us all. I feel privileged to have played a part in shaping our journey, from our humble origins in a basement in Dorchester to an “up-market” basement in Franklin St. It’s a great story!

In spring 1988 I arrived in Boston, intending to take time out from my years of community organizing in a large, low-income housing development in Dublin. But on the basis of the impact of that work, despite my lack of a college degree, I was accepted into the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) Master’s program in Administration, Planning and Social Policy. There, quite unexpectedly, I found the passion and purpose of my life for the next 25 years.

One of my projects in HGSE was a long paper for which I researched the experiences of Boston’s undocumented Irish immigrants with an estimated 30,000 living in Greater Boston. By “hanging out” and interviewing the Irish “undocumented”, I learned about the underground existence they led, afraid they would be deported if they sought help with issues like housing, workplace mistreatment or personal struggles. They also feared a call from Ireland with bad news, knowing they could not safely return home.

During my research I encountered the Irish Immigration Reform Movement (IIRM), founded in 1987 in New York to lobby for changes in federal immigration law. IIRM was concerned about the estimated 150,000 undocumented Irish immigrants nationally and initiated “volunteer social service groups” to provide support for the most vulnerable. That led to the opening of the Emerald Isle Immigration Center (EIIC) in New York in 1988, followed by the incorporation of the Boston EIIC in October 1989 – the founding date we celebrate this year.

In a basement office in Dorchester, Rena Cody, Odette Harrington, Teresa O’Hara and a few friends spearheaded the Boston EIIC, setting up a confidential hotline to provide advice to the new Donnelly Visa recipients and undocumented immigrants. Elaine Flynn, on her arrival in Boston on a Donnelly visa, secured a job with Odette’s help, and immediately became a staunch volunteer. As I’d known Rena in Dublin, I sought her out during my research project and subsequently became a hotline volunteer. Rena gave advice on health and welfare issues, while Odette developed a Job Bank to provide assistance with US-style résumés and interviewing skills. Teresa wrote our first grant proposals and Mary McLoughlin, whose parents came from the West of Ireland, offered her services as an immigration attorney.

This group of women had a broad vision for the organization, which involved working together in common cause with all immigrants. In time, they changed the name to Irish Immigration Center (IIC), to better reflect the ethos of the new Irish immigrants. The IIC was inclusive of diverse expressions of Irishness; it mattered not your political or religious

affiliation, your gender or sexual orientation, your education or economic circumstances. It was an exciting time, and even though we had few financial resources we did possess the greatest resource of all: talented, open-minded, recent Irish immigrants.

**In our first phase we were an entirely volunteer-led organization.** Volunteers were creative and energetic and were shaping an inclusive, outward-looking organization. Lasting friendships were made, some even leading to wedding bells! It was a home away from home. Volunteers initiated and managed programs such as, writing newsletters, maintaining job/ housing lists, advice on finance and taxes, resume writing, and providing a listening ear when necessary. They organized fundraising events to pay IIC bills and volunteers paid small membership fees. Anne Kieran, who would later become Accounts and HR manager, put in place fiscally responsible systems with oversight of all donations.

This work was recognized in September 1990 when we received our first grant from the Irish government of \$16,000. That same year the Diversity/Morrison Visa legislation came into effect. In 1991 we hired two part-time staff: Outreach Co-ordinator David Mooney, and me as Executive Director. We moved from the Dorchester basement to downtown West Street. It was a tiny desk space opening onto the elevator, all of 18 sq ft. It was so cramped that we often met clients in the spacious Burger King on the corner, which offered more privacy.

For the next three years our major focus was assisting immigrants with the Morrison visas process. With over 60 volunteers we held information sessions in various locations in Boston and surrounding cities plus Cape Cod and Worcester. Hundreds of anxious immigrants attended. I'll never forget the 600 immigrants who filled a hall in Quincy seeking advice and help. Immigration attorney Eoin Reilly began his long-standing pro bono legal work with IIC and invited other attorneys to assist with legal questions. Volunteers were always on hand to help fill out forms and give advice on securing employment

In 1992 we moved into a lovely office space at 18 Tremont Street. Here we were able to establish a cosy, friendly drop-in Center. We received a Mutual Assistance grant from the Massachusetts Office of Refugees & Immigrants (MORI) of \$14,000 intended to enable small, immigrant-led, grassroots non-profits to understand US legal systems and develop strategic plans. MORI introduced us to diverse immigrant groups, helping us to build cross-cultural relationships and to understand the complex challenges of language differences and racial discrimination.

In autumn 1993 we held our inaugural Annual Awards Dinner in honor of Senator Ted Kennedy. By 1996 this gala night attracted 1,200 guests to honor the President of Ireland, Mary Robinson. We set ambitious strategic goals for these events, always with an eye to increasing our profile and widening our influence so we could continue our important work.

In 1995 we moved to a larger office, on Temple Place. Sheila Gleeson was hired as Director of Immigration Legal Services, and in 1998 IIC was accredited by INS/CIS to represent clients. This was a great recognition of her work as Director of Immigration Services, and her staff, and was made possible by the generosity of Attorney Richard Landoli who provided training and supervision of staff until we hired our first immigration attorney in 2006.

In 1996 we opened an outreach office in Allston. Cora Flood and Denise McCool, who would have a major impact in developing innovative cross-cultural programs, worked out of the Allston office. Assisted by a large team of volunteers, their focus was to promote an understanding of the history of racism between local Irish Americans and African Americans and to explore ways to heal those divisions. Among our unique programs was Denise's "A Different Beat", in which Caribbean, African and Irish drummers came together to share their cultural traditions. It was a resounding success, with the group later performing in South Boston and Roxbury. And Cora developed the "Risk of Understanding" program with Roxbury Community College. It brought together African American students and new Irish immigrants to listen to one another's experiences. And we developed an ongoing partnership with the Montserrat Aspirers and the annual Black & Green event.

Simultaneously, we started to diversify our board and staff and attracted more interns and work-study students who were drawn to the diversity, creativity, and learning opportunities we offered. This was the creative and cultural side of IIC and it attracted much attention as it was perceived to be a very unusual move for an Irish organization.

**In our second phase we became a staff-led organization with volunteer support** with highly regulated international programs. Following on from the historic Good Friday Agreement in 1998, Congressman Jim Walsh and Congressman Richard Neal introduced a Bill to create opportunities for young, unemployed unionists and nationalists, and those living in border counties to spend up to three years in the US learning job skills and peaceful ways of resolving conflict. This program was named the Walsh Visa Program (WVP) after Congressman Jim Walsh. In 2000 we welcomed the first cohort of 20 young WVP recipients and we at IIC were tasked with making the necessary living and work connections for them. In the coming years we gave opportunity to 284 young adults via the WVP. This was a major step for the IIC, as we grew from a local to an international group, with funding from the US, Irish and UK governments. The organization doubled in size and had an Accounts and Human Resources Department with 2 staff.

Through our capable administration of the Walsh Visa Program we not only maintained financial stability but also secured the job of administering several other fully funded EU short-term peace and cultural programs. With these accomplishments we applied to the US State Department to be accredited to process J: 1 visa, and thanks to Mike Buckley our resident volunteer attorney our application was approved. Thus when the Irish Government announced the new J: 1 Irish Work & Travel visas we were ready to process the new visas.

There were difficult times, too. The aftermath of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 were far reaching and devastating, with a backlash against immigrants, particular Muslims. All of us at the IIC were shaken, especially our young people from Northern Ireland who were shocked into painful memories of prior trauma, and some returned home. The recession of 2008 was one of my most difficult times as I had to let staff go --really good, loyal staff--some funders affected by the recession could no longer fund us. The massive 7.0 earthquake in Haiti in 2010 caused such death and destruction. I remember well waking up to the news and as a frequent visitor to Haiti I was so upset. I secured additional funding for legal services and we assisted over 300 Haitians.

In 2005 I was chosen as one of twelve “experienced and gifted non-profit leaders” from the Boston area to participate in the first Barr Fellowship Program, which provided us with funding for an Interim Executive Director, Gisele Michel, so that I could fully participate in the program’s international, hands-on continued learning. Gisele Michel launched our now very successful English for Speakers of Other Languages program.

**In 2011 we entered our third phase: preparing for transition.** The IIC changed its name to the Irish International Immigrant Center (IIIC) in January 2011. The board and staff began the process of preparing for my departure in 2013 and for Ronnie Millar assuming the role of Executive Director. Six years later, I’m so proud of how IIIC has grown under Ronnie’s leadership with the help and dedication of his staff, board and so many very generous donors. In particular, I’d like to note my gratitude for the Irish Government’s increasing grants, which have been awarded annually since 1990. And also a special thanks to all Board members, including long time board treasurer Mike Niland and Board Presidents; Odette Harrington; Patrick Riordan; Colm Renehan; Gobnait Conneely; James Morrison; Joanna Connolly and Mike Buckley for their leadership and support over the years.

The IIIC is as relevant and hardworking as ever and continues to tackle its challenging work with eager devotion. The sense of purpose formulated by the founding members has been critical to the IIIC’s lasting relevance. I believe the secret of our success is this: while we’ve always had a close concern for Irish immigrants, Ireland and the role of Irish Americans in US society, we’ve also maintained an equally strong concern for immigrants from all countries and for promoting racial harmony nationally and internationally. From the start we developed a mission flexible enough to last and to adjust to changing needs.

Today as I reflect on my time at IIIC, I’m grateful for all the people who have influenced me, heartened by all we’ve achieved, but I’m also aware that it’s impossible to mention all programs or each of our valued contributors by name in such a short piece. That is for another time! So please email me to share a story or offer a correction, I’d love to hear from you.

In conclusion I want to thank my friend Kate Phillips in bringing this article to fruition. And finally to pay tribute to my religious order the Little Sisters of the Assumption (LSA) who made it possible for me to dedicate so many years to IIIC, and in particular to Sister Margaret Leonard my mentor and friend. I’m blessed to be a member of an International religious order – a religious order without borders-- whose mission is to journey with and empower the vulnerable and excluded whether in Boston, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Vietnam or Dublin.....And to befriend our earth by our care and respect.

I hope that all who have been touched by IIIC will continue to act generously with others and listen carefully even when differences arise, because intolerance cannot flourish when we hear one another’s stories and live in fellowship with one other and with this beautiful, sacred planet.

Let’s keep up the good work, friends!  
Lena Deevy LSA