



Mixed Emotions

Real stories of mixed marriage



Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association

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We don't need to be labelled

We don't need to be labelled

David and Nuala are in their early forties. They have been married for nearly 20 years and have four children. David is an electronic engineer while Nuala is a classroom assistant in a local primary school. They have known each other nearly all their adult lives.

David and Nuala live in a quiet cul-de-sac on the outskirts of Carryduff, a small town to the south of Belfast. It is an area where many mixed married couples have chosen to live. "It's a good place to bring up children", says David. "A place where people get along and get on with their lives". "Yes", says Nuala, "we're lucky to have been able to make our home here, away from Belfast with all of its traditional problems, in a town where barriers have been broken down and good relationships forged."

The suburbs of County Down are a world away from the terraces of North Belfast where Nuala was born and brought up. "I grew up on the city's New Lodge Road, which was a really Catholic district in one of the worst areas of sectarian conflict in the country. I went to the local primary school and can honestly say that I would not have met or even thought about Protestants until, thanks to the hard work of my mother and father, we were able to move to a much bigger house on the Oldpark Road when I was eleven. That was a dramatic change, as there was only one other Catholic family on that part of

the road, although it really made no difference to me or my four brothers and sister. We hadn't been brought up to be 'bitter' as they say in Belfast. Both my mother and late father were good decent people who had friends from both communities and encouraged us to do the same."

Nuala passed her Eleven Plus exam and for the next seven years travelled across Belfast to St Dominic's Grammar School on the city's Falls Road. "There were other good schools much closer to home", she says, "one just 10 minutes walk down the road, but those were the days when Catholics went to only Catholic schools, so I and many like me had to grin and bear it." St Dominic's was all girl and all Catholic, so it wasn't until Nuala, aged 16, got a part-time job in Woolworths that she got the chance to mix with people of other denominations. "I quickly made friends, regardless of religion, and learned what a social life was all about."

Two years later, Nuala went to Queen's University to study French and Business and found herself sharing a house with girls of all denominations and none. "Nobody cared what religion anyone was", she says, "and that's the way it should be." Nuala's first year at Queen's was also significant for the fact that at the end of it, she met David.

David was born and raised Church of Ireland on the predominantly Protestant Belvoir Park estate in South Belfast. "There were two Catholic families in the estate," says David, "but only two. That's just the way it was. I didn't think about it at all. I hadn't been brought up to have prejudices against anyone because of his or her

religion, although I suppose I had heard all the usual derogatory remarks about Catholics or ‘Taigs’ as they were called, by the time I went to grammar school. I was lucky in that my parents were not bigoted. Both had Catholic friends. My mum’s best friend, Rosemary, was a Catholic who became her bridesmaid, while my dad was a committed trade unionist who looked forward to a time when Protestant and Catholics workers could put socialist politics before bigotry.”

“Very appropriate then that I should attend what was described as Belfast’s working class grammar school, Annadale. It was mostly Protestant – all boys – but it did give me a good education.”

David went on to Queen’s University to study Electronic Engineering and, after seven years and being offered a lectureship there, gained his doctorate.

David had met Nuala on a campsite in Spain when he was a shy sixth former from Annadale and she was a ‘sophisticated’ undergraduate at Queen’s.

“I was 19 at the time”, says Nuala. “so, I suppose he was my toy boy. All I knew was that we hit it off right away hundreds of miles from Belfast and light years from the kind of sectarianism that was the norm then.”

David remembers, “We travelled home on the same coach – yes, a coach from Spain to Northern Ireland – and I was disappointed that Nuala had already arranged to stop off in London.” His disappointment eased when he rang Nuala’s home a couple of weeks later and they started going out together.

There were problems connected with that, though geographical rather than religious. “We lived at the two extremes of Belfast”, says David, “I mean North and South and without a car between us, we relied on public transport. Obviously, our parents worried about our safety in travelling across the city in such dangerous times, but we persevered and it was well worth it.”

“I think we knew pretty quickly that we wanted to be together”, says Nuala. “We talked about what we wanted, decided what was best for us and got on with it. Religion was never a dominant topic of conversation”, says David, “we never shied away from it, but we were always positive and our families were tremendously supportive.”

David and Nuala were married in 1992 at her local Catholic church, weeks after David graduated, in an inclusive service that saw David’s rector, fully robed for the occasion, give the sermon. “It was a great day”, says Nuala, “and one that augured well for the years ahead. Of course, we’ve been lucky, but we’ve also had to work at it – like all couples in all marriages – and the fact that our families are very similar was a bonus.”

Today, Nuala and David have two boys and two girls. “We feel that integrated education is the single most important thing in helping to bring about a shared future in this country”, says David. “Our children, although baptised Catholic, attend either state or integrated schools and are all the better for it. I’m not sure how they would describe themselves if they ever thought about it”, says Nuala, “baptised Catholic and their activities include

Baptist Girls' Brigade, Church of Ireland youth club, Church of Ireland scouts and a Presbyterian summer scheme. As good a mix as you could wish for."

"Being in a mixed marriage has certainly influenced how we feel about organised religion", says David. "We don't have a need to have either ourselves or our children labelled as one thing or the other. We are bits of all and we want our kids to dip into everything and just be happy."

"The rituals and discipline of organised religion dominated a lot of my early life, but, even with the best of intentions, this was not what we wanted for our boys and girls."

"I would advise any young couple thinking about making a mixed marriage to have the courage of their convictions, to stay true to themselves and to follow their instincts", says David, "and to cultivate their good, black, Northern sense of humour."

"Most of our friends, half of whom are in mixed marriages, enjoy the craic and banter of slagging each other off about religion, about 'Prods and Taigs' and all the rest of it. That's the way it should and can be in a 'normal' society. It's fun and its healthy and, better still, it's harmless. We look forward to the day when it's like that right across the country."



David & Nuala



All love stories are unique and these ten accounts of mixed marriage are no exception. Each story is shared with openness and courage and, stretching back nearly seventy years, the collective experience on offer reveals much about the attitudes of the day, showing how society has changed and, yet, how it remains the same.

Their experiences show how relationships can be made to blossom, even when it is made most difficult and we should be thankful that they have also shown us how, in the face of adversity, we can aspire and achieve far beyond our common divisions.

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