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## STUDENTS EMBRACE IRELAND

## SERVICE TRIP SPARKS GOODWILL AND A SURPRISE LOVE.

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | August 1, 2024*Read time: about 3 min*

When 14 Christopher Newport students embarked on a service trip to Ireland, they anticipated hard work, a transformative experience and the opportunity to foster goodwill.

However, they returned with so much more: a love for Ireland, its people, and an unexpected newfound passion for hurling, an ancient Irish sport they previously knew nothing about.

It all started when the students, who were doing volunteer work in the Irish city of Carrigaline as part of an experience sponsored by the [President's Leadership Program](#), were invited by local councilwoman Una McCarthy to watch a local hurling club practice. Players asked the students to join them on the field to participate in drills.

"The students loved learning skills and how to play this ancient game. They walked off the field after their lesson and were committed to bringing the sport back to Newport News," said Will Reddy, associate director of PLP and organizer of the trip.

As a result of that day, CNU in the fall will have its own club hurling team, a way for the students to keep their deep connection to Ireland alive. Hurling, which is played on a field, has traits similar to field hockey and lacrosse.

"The city welcomed us with open arms and everyone showed their support for what we were doing in the

community,” said Melissa McDonnell, ‘27 [Marketing](#), one of the students who went on the trip and president of the newly-formed team. “The kindness of the people we’ve met extended beyond this trip. As a group, we decided to bring back the Gaelic sport of hurling to CNU.”

The excursion was a part of a larger relationship CNU has forged with [Sister Cities of Newport News \(SCNN\)](#), a non-profit organization that works to partner Newport News with cities all over the world. Newport News is a “sister city” to Carrigaline. Christopher Newport faculty have taken several trips abroad with Sister Cities, and CNU has hosted international delegations as part of the organization's mission to foster global understanding and connection.

“CNU’s and SCNN’s goals align,” said Fred Kohlman, Board President of SCNN. “SCNN’s relationship with CNU is extensive and longstanding. Our successful combined visit to Ireland is one of what we hope will be many future CNU/SCNN combined journeys.”

The students worked hard in Ireland to make a difference, volunteering to help with improvements to an Irish church, fort and town. The fort, Camden Fort Meagher, was built in Ireland hundreds of years before the students were born. At the fort, students painted, scrubbed, and assisted with renovations to the historic site. For Anna Strassel, ‘25 [Communication Studies](#), being part of the effort to restore the historic Irish military landmark was meaningful.

“The service aspect is what had me on this trip to begin with,” Strassel said. “Knowing that a centuries old structure across the Atlantic is standing a little stronger because of work I helped complete is unparalleled.

“Going forward, my experience serving abroad in Ireland is going to be a cornerstone I look back on as a student at Christopher Newport,” she said.

Irish officials were impressed by the students’ strong work ethic and spirit of collaboration.

“It was a pleasure and privilege to have such an enthusiastically helpful group of students to assist with our project,” said Cllr Audrey Buckle, an elected official in County Cork, one of the areas in which the students worked. “Students and leaders applied themselves in the groundwork tasks with a great work ethic, a sense of togetherness, and showed initiative and good humor throughout. The amount of work achieved in record time was amazing and we are truly grateful for all of your help. You guys are a credit to yourselves, your parents, your university, and your country.”

The experience provided the Captains with a different world perspective and a fresh take on themselves.

“I learned to push myself on this trip. I pushed myself to work harder at the project sites. I pushed myself to get to know people instead of shying away, and I pushed myself to take the leadership role in some situations rather than being a passive follower,” said McDonnell. “It was in the uncomfortable and unknown that I grew as a person.”

The weeklong trip had several purposes, Reddy said.

“We want students to feel confident in traveling abroad and also recognize the might of their activities in helping to build bridges,” he said.

Reddy said the students cultivated relationships, worked tirelessly to complete service projects, and saw a part of the world many had not seen before.

“It shrunk the world a little for them,” he said. “They learned more about themselves outside of their comfort zone, through the lens of giving back to a community.”

Erin Burrier, ‘25 [Political Science](#) and [American Studies](#), said the experience proved life changing.

“I learned more about the global community and witnessed firsthand the universal human experience and desire to connect with others. I also gained a new sense of self-confidence and formed lifelong friends as I navigated the challenges and celebrations,” she said. “Engaging in both service and cultural activities allowed us to give back to the community while experiencing Ireland at its fullest.”

