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Despite peace, Belfast walls are growing in size and number

By SHAWN POGATCHNIK
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BELFAST, Northern Ireland -- Lee Young, 8, and Cein Quinn, 7, live barely 200 yards apart, but they have never met, and maybe never will.

Lee is Protestant, Cein a Catholic _ and their communities in Belfast's west inner city are separated by a wall called a peace line. It's nearly 40 years old and 40 feet high.

Ten years after peace was declared in Northern Ireland, one might have expected that Belfast's barriers would be torn down by now. But reality, as usual, is far messier. Not one has been dismantled. Instead they've grown in both size and number.

The past decade of peacemaking has brought political elites of both sides together in a Catholic-Protestant government in hopes that their example would trickle down. Their experiment in cooperation, highlighted by the power-sharing government's first anniversary Thursday, has encouraged thriving employment, tourism and nightlife.

But it has not delivered meaningful reconciliation. Instead, for dozens of front-line communities of Belfast, fences still make the best neighbors.

"The Troubles" began at these sectarian flashpoints in the late 1960s, and survive today in a legacy of mutual fear and loathing. The rate of sectarian killings has fallen to virtually zero thanks to cease-fires underpinned by IRA disarmament, and the feeling on both sides is that the barriers help keep that peace.

"No. No way does that peace line come down," said Cein's mother, Allison Quinn, 32, sitting on her living room sofa on the Catholic side of the fence alongside her sister and a cousin.

Despite its height, every so often a particularly strong-armed Protestant manages to hurl a brick over the top _ enough to rattle any backyard barbecue.

"It's definitely not safe to take it down, and I don't think it ever will be. There's bitter loyalists over there," Quinn said, using a term for anti-Catholic militants. "They're out drinking in the street at night. If you take it down, they'd have easy access here and come over starting fights. You'd just be asking for trouble."

The wall 30 paces from her front door was born in 1969 as makeshift coils of barbed wire laid by British troops, shipped in following riots that forced hundreds of families, mostly Catholics, from their homes.

At the time, the senior British army commander, Lt. Gen. Ian Freeland, predicted: "The peace line will be a very, very temporary affair. We will not have a Berlin Wall or anything like that in this city."

But those barbed-wire coils became miles-long brick walls separating Catholic from Protestant in west Belfast. Even higher walls shield a Catholic enclave in Protestant east Belfast, while the north side is carved up by dozens of smaller barriers.

In this city of 650,000, roughly half Catholic and half Protestant, only the university district and upper-class streets, chiefly on the south side, bear no clear-cut tribal identity.

The newest peace line, erected earlier this year, runs past one of Belfast's few "integrated" elementary schools _ a place where Catholic and Protestant students are deliberately brought together. Fewer than 3 percent of Northern Ireland kids attend such schools.

Quinn, an unemployed single mother, loves her newly built town house, complete with oak floors and modern kitchen, its rent subsidized by the British government Housing Executive. That it's right by the barricade doesn't bother her at all.

"I would never move. It's so handy. And it's lovely," Quinn says emphatically.

Just then her boy Cein comes in, rubbing his head after bumping it on a curbstone while playing outside. He's soon immersed in his handheld video game.

Asked if he's ever gone next door to see the Protestants, Cein says no. Would he like to meet his neighbors and play in their playground?

"No way," he says with a smile. Why not? "'Cuz they're ugly."

His mother shrugs. "I'd like him to mix with Protestant kids, but it's just not safe," she says.

Outside Quinn's cul-de-sac, children's voices float over from beyond the wall. By day, when the peace line is opened for traffic, those kids are a few minutes' walk away. By dusk, when the doors are locked, it might take an hour.

On the Protestant side of the wall is a fenced-in, concrete soccer field. Here a stranger is greeted by two boys who let loose with suspicious questions and bigoted quips. Their fathers belong to the UDA, the Ulster Defense Association, a militant Protestant group that killed more than 300 Catholics from 1971 to its 1994 cease-fire.

"Are youse a taig?" says one burly boy, using an insulting word for an Irish Catholic.

"It's all taigs over there," says another, waving dismissively at the wall. "They're soap-dodgers, so they are."

Soap-dodgers?

"Sure, them ones never take a shower. You can smell 'em from here." The boys laugh and resume their game.

This is where Lee Young, Cein's neighbor, plays soccer. The boy wears the blue jersey of Glasgow Rangers, a Scottish soccer club with an exclusively Protestant following in Belfast. Were he to walk next door onto Catholic turf, he would be certain to suffer verbal bullying or worse _ perhaps from kids wearing the green of Glasgow Celtic, the Catholic favorite.

Wearing the "wrong" sports gear is just one of scores of sectarian measuring sticks that have proven deadly in the past. So are names. A "Cein" _ a Gaelic name pronounced Keane _ would be instantly identified as Irish Catholic, because the Protestant side shuns the Irish language.

On Lee's Protestant street, just past the modest playground, a few wind-tattered British flags flutter above doorsteps and a wall mural salutes the masked gunmen of the UDA. Youths have adorned walls with "KAT," short for "Kill all taigs," as well as insults to the pope.

On the Catholic side, the turf is marked with Irish flags, Gaelic street signs, IRA murals and insults to Queen Elizabeth II.

John Young, Lee's dad, is as moderate a soul as you could meet on either side of the peace line. He thinks the peace process, and gradually lessening tensions, mean that the wall probably could come down. But there's always a but.

"But there's no need to take it down. I wouldn't really think about it at all. I'm happy enough with it there," said Young, 34.

Young acknowledges that only a decade ago he was a hard-line hothead who joined the Orange Order, a Protestant club with an anti-Catholic ethos, and scuffled with police and Catholics in street clashes.

He says his varied work experiences since _ as security guard, construction worker and now grocery store deliveryman _ mellowed him through regular social contact with Catholics. He resigned from the Orange Order a few years ago.

"I drive through that peace line almost every day to the other side's homes and there's no bother," Young said. "The other side would actually treat you better _ tip you quicker."

But he acknowledges that some neighborhoods, those most notorious for Irish Republican Army sympathies, give him the creeps. "There's areas I have to drive into where the hair stands up on the back of your neck. But that's only natural."

Catholic colleagues on occasion have invited him across the wall for an after-hours pint at their pub. He won't go.

"You'd be afraid that they might recognize you're from the other side. Am I too tight in the eyes?" he said, referring to a stereotype of Protestant eyes supposedly being closer together.

His boy is asked whether he'd like to go over the wall to play with Catholics.

"The wall's so the taigs don't attack us. We don't go over there," Lee answers matter-of-factly.

His father is visibly discomforted. "My son wouldn't know a Catholic from a Hindu. It's just the friends he plays with. They're sons of UDA men and they teach him: 'That's taigs over there,'" he said.

If Lee and Cein ever met, it would be at one of Belfast's many "neutral" playgrounds, pools, parks or upscale suburbs.

Indeed, the nearest Cein and many other kids from west Belfast have been to Lee's home is a city-run swimming pool on the nearby Shankill Road. It has Belfast's only wave-maker. They travel there in school-supervised visits.

Cein's mother said she would like to shop on the Shankill, where stores are family-run and cheaper. The IRA blew one up in 1993, a fishmonger's, killing nine Protestants in a bungled targeting of UDA commanders.

But there's only one Shankill business she considers worth the risk _ the drive-through window of Kentucky Fried Chicken.

"We've got no Kentucky on our side. Mmm-mmm," she said, making a finger-licking gesture. "But you'd never walk. You'd nip over and make it quick."

There are striking similarities between the experiences of the Quinns and the Youngs. Both feel safe living beside a peace line. Both say their problems come from hell-raisers within their own community, not the other side. Both feel powerless to stop them.

Quinn said her previous neighborhood _ barely a half-mile away in a sprawling, low-rise housing project _ is increasingly overrun by glue-sniffing, car-stealing teens. Such behavior was once brutally suppressed by IRA "kneecapping" squads. But the group has been keeping its 2005 promise to renounce bloodshed, and that means no more vigilante violence either.

"The hoods have taken over. There's no telling them what to do. It's the Wild West," she said.

Quinn says she has never called the cops to prevent a crime, and doesn't think she ever will. Her attitude illustrates the other daunting task of peacemaking _ to build Catholic trust in what was once an overwhelmingly Protestant police force.

A sweeping reform program with affirmative-action recruitment over the past seven years has dramatically reshaped the police, with the goal of a 30 percent Catholic force. But many Catholics remain hostile to the police _ or fearful of being labeled collaborators.

So does she think the IRA should resume shooting teens in the legs? An uncomfortable silence follows.

"Well, I don't know. But the current situation is out of control," she says finally.

Like Quinn, Young moved his family much closer to a peace line about three years ago to get a better state-provided house, even though the street had a history of murderous UDA feuding. "Before, you'd be considered crazy to buy here. But people's attitudes are changing. There's not so much to be scared of anymore," Young said.

But police say UDA members orchestrate most crime in the area. Some are Young's neighbors.

"I call them the problem ones," he said, pointing to a row of houses outside his kitchen window, then lowering his finger because he didn't want anyone there to see. "I know who they are and what they do."

His backyard fence burned down recently when a car belonging to a UDA neighbor was torched, apparently in a criminal dispute.

"I've really no problems with Roman Catholics," Young said with a wry smile. "It's my own kind that cause me the headaches. Maybe I need another peace line!"

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On the Net:

Map and photos of Belfast peace lines:

http://www.belfastinterfaceproject.org/interfacemap.asp