

A FULBRIGHT EXPERIENCE IN IRELAND: FINDING A NEW MEDIUM TO TELL THE STORIES OF IRISH MEN'S SHEDS MEMBERS

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ABSTRACT

As a Fulbright Scholar in Ireland, I learned about Irish Men's Sheds and how they impacted the well-being of older men. Hearing the stories from Men's Shed members inspired me to share their stories on a wider scale. After returning to the US, I collaborated with a colleague to make a documentary on the Irish Men's Sheds. The Fulbright experience challenged me to consider new mediums to tell the stories of older adults.

Keywords: Ireland • men's sheds • stories • older adults



THE MEN'S SHED MOVEMENT

In 2018 I led a study abroad program in Ireland with students from my university. While there, we visited a Men's Shed in Dundalk, Ireland. I had heard about Men's Sheds from a colleague I serendipitously met at The Gerontological Society of America conference that I attend annually. This colleague suggested that I include a visit to a Men's Shed. I had never heard of Men's Shed prior to our discussion and decided to add it to the travel itinerary. Little did I know just how influential Men's Sheds would become in my life. While in Ireland with students, we learned more about the expanding Men's Shed Movement. It began in Australia in the 1990s and Men's Sheds can now be found in other parts of the world. Ireland currently has the most Men's Sheds per capita since beginning in 2012. Men's Sheds are a group of men who meet up and enjoy one another's company through conversation, work on projects together (many often involve woodwork), and sometimes go out into the community to attend events or travel together. Each Men's Shed looks a bit different, but the Irish Men's Shed Association has a set of bylaws that each Men's Shed must follow. The rules range from having no alcohol on premises to no bullying and encourage Men's Sheds to create an environment where all are welcome.

At the Men's Shed in Dundalk, the men gave us a tour of their art studio, garden, and woodworking space and were eager to tell us what the Men's Shed Movement was all about. Throughout our study abroad program, the students and I reflected on how engaged the men seemed to be. They were busy, they were active, and they thoroughly enjoyed their time at the shed.

Our visit to the Men's Shed was brief, but I could not stop thinking about it. After returning to the US I read more about Men's Sheds and wondered why the concept did not seem to exist in the US I wanted to find a way to return to Ireland to learn more about the Men's Shed Movement.

APPLYING TO FULBRIGHT

During the beginning of the pandemic, the university I worked for decided to move online after spring break. This shift allowed me to work from home, rather than making my two-hour round-trip commute to the office. This newfound pocket of time afforded me time to do something productive. With two additional hours each day, I reasoned that I could devote time to learning more about Fulbright opportunities and to see if any fit with the desire to go to Ireland to learn more about Men's Sheds. I began researching Men's Sheds extensively and crafting my program statement telling the story of why I needed to return to Ireland to learn more about how Men's Sheds contribute to purpose and meaning in the lives of older, retired men. Most Men's Sheds members are older adults and men (as compared to women) can face more challenges during retirement, particularly socially. They are less likely to have maintained connections and relationships with former coworkers and are less likely to build new friendships. However, attending a Men's Shed allows men to regularly connect with others, and shed visits become part of a routine that they can count on. It is through discussions "shoulder to shoulder" while working on projects together that men often open up to one another and reveal concerns and worries on their minds. As a result, Men's Sheds seem to positively contribute to men's mental health. They provide a protective and safe outlet for men to forge new friendships and enjoy close ties with other men.

As the deadline for the application program neared, I also met with a researcher at the institution I hoped would serve as my host institution, the Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest (TUS). Dr. Patrick Murray and I met on Zoom to discuss my project. Despite coming from very different disciplines, he was enthusiastic and supportive of my proposed project on Men's Sheds. One of his former students had been a Fulbrighter in the US and he had seen how beneficial an award could be. He agreed to write me a recommendation letter that I submitted with my application.

FULBRIGHT NOTIFICATION

I will never forget the day I received an email from Fulbright notifying me of my Fulbright Scholar award to Ireland. It was mid-April of 2021 and I was finishing up an advising appointment with a student when I saw an email notification from Fulbright pop up on my screen. After the advisee left, I clicked on the email and braced myself for what was in the attached letter. I learned that I was one of the lucky ones selected to join the 2021-2022 cohort of Fulbright Scholars to Ireland!

That summer was full of planning, organizing, and mapping out the logistics of what our stay in Ireland would look like. Finding housing proved to be one of the biggest challenges we encountered. Although we had planned to live in Limerick City where my university was located, we were unable to find short-term housing. We eventually secured an apartment in a small village in Ballina, County Tipperary, approximately 30 minutes from Limerick City. I felt a sense of relief when we knew where our home base would be for the next four months.

SETTLING IN

In early January 2022, my husband and I as well as two daughters, ages 5 years old and 6 months old flew to Ireland to begin our adventure. We settled into Ballina and found the people to be friendly and welcoming. It was a place where children played outside by themselves and regularly visited the petrol station with friends to buy snacks and other treats unchaperoned. Many children walked to school either by themselves or with classmates and I found their independence to be intriguing. Although I considered my community in the US to be quite safe, it was rare to see children walking to school or playing outdoors alone.

We met with my daughter's Múinteoir (teacher) after her first day and learned that she had made new friends and seemed to be adjusting well. But I also discovered that I had already committed a parenting faux pa, I failed to pack my daughter a lunch that day. It never occurred to me that there might not be a cafeteria to purchase food. I later learned that many of the primary schools in Ireland did not have cafeterias.

Later that first week, I met with colleagues at TUS. Our meeting was one of the first face-to-face interactions many of my new colleagues had had in months. Due to COVID-19 precautions, many employees were working remotely. The office space I was assigned was with three other biological researchers. Although we came from different academic disciplines, I became acquainted with those officemates quite well during our daily tea break at 11 am. In the US, my coworkers and I were guilty of almost never slowing down to get a coffee or share a chat during work hours. However, teatime allowed me to learn more about life in Ireland and was a time where I was able to ask questions about slang I had heard, politics, the school system, housing, and

so many other topics. Likewise, I was able to provide insight into how these systems functioned in the US. Reflecting on this experience made me realize that I knew little about my coworkers in the US, despite working in the same building as them as for nearly a decade.

MEN'S SHED INTERVIEWS

The purpose of my research on Men's Sheds was to conduct interviews with older, retired men to learn more about how Men's Sheds gave them a sense of purpose and meaning. I wanted to learn more about how they joined the shed, what they did there and why they kept coming back. After obtaining approval from the Ethics Committee, I began visiting Men's Sheds in mid-January.

The Irish Men's Shed Association saved me significant legwork by having the names of each Men's Shed and its associated chairperson and secretary listed on its website. This allowed me to call each Men's Shed and ask them if I could come for a visit to discuss my project. I was nervous about these "cold calls" and wondered how I would be perceived. I feared the members might be suspicious of my intent, particularly since I was not from Ireland. However, I was pleasantly surprised when the men seemed happy to have me visit and eager to show me what their Men's Shed was about.

The first interview I conducted was in a small rural village and the men there wanted to see my COVID vaccine card before letting me enter. They recorded my name and telephone number, explaining that it helped with contact tracing. They had recently opened their Men's Shed back up and were taking precautions so that the shed could remain open. I asked the men to talk about what the Men's Shed meant to them. Many of the men discussed how they found retirement to be challenging and more isolating than they had anticipated. Some men explained how they had seen their peers struggle and intentionally joined the Men's Shed prior to retiring to avoid that outcome for themselves.

I have interviewed many older adults about a variety of subjects and sometimes during an interview a participant says something that really stands out to me, and I know in that moment that their quote will be used when I report the research findings. One man talked about how depressed he felt prior to joining the Men's Shed. His words about spending his days "*Looking out the window with little to do, wondering what am I going to do today? What am I going to do tomorrow?*" moved me. I remember being transfixed in the interview; his honesty drew me in. I could clearly see how the Men's Shed had positively impacted his life.

During some of the interviews the men asked if there was something I might be able to do for them. Could I elevate the Men's Shed a bit? Show others how important it was? Throughout my time in Ireland this thought gnawed at me. What could I do? How could I share how meaningful the Men's Shed was on a wider scale? I promised the men that I would try to think of something.

SOMETHING MORE

In early April I heard that the Catalyst International Film Festival was taking place in Limerick City. I left work early one afternoon to check out the documentary portion at a local theater. While sitting in the audience I wondered if I could somehow piece together the interviews from the men into a documentary. I had zero experience with filmmaking, but I believed in the power of the stories that the men shared with me. What the men shared was so genuine and I wanted others to learn more about Men's Sheds and understand how sheds can be a resource for older men. Men's Sheds are more than just a building or a group of men, they provide a protective circle around men, insulating them from the pain of isolation, loneliness, and depression.

One of the first people I talked with about piecing the interviews together was my colleague, Laura Gleissner, the Art Gallery Director at the University of Northern Iowa. She had experience with video editing and seemed intrigued by my idea and suggested that I get some b-roll while I was there. Showing myself as a true novice, I asked what b-roll was! She laughed but explained that it was short video snippets of the scenery and environment that could be used to help with transitions in the documentary. I had approximately two weeks left in Ireland and spent much of it frantically driving around to different Men's Sheds to get a few more pictures as well as b-roll footage of the scenery.

After arriving back in the US, I met with Laura to map out ideas for the documentary. I told her that one of my goals was to finish the documentary in time for the January 2023 Catalyst International Film Festival deadline. Laura and I had several work sessions and I appreciated that she always gave me tasks beforehand to make our work time together the most efficient it could be. She instructed me to select the interviews that I found most moving, find music, and record voiceovers to help with transitions throughout the documentary. Engaging in the process of creating the documentary was so rewarding. I enjoyed the creative process of finding the right music to pair with a man's interview that related to the feeling he was evoking. I was also excited about disseminating the information beyond an academic journal and increasing the likelihood that a more diverse audience would engage with the content.

We submitted the documentary on time, and I know without Laura's help and ability to seamlessly navigate the video editing software, there would not be a Men's Shed documentary. I am forever grateful to Laura for investing in this project and believing in its value. In February 2023 we learned that the Irish Men's Shed documentary was selected for inclusion in the Catalyst International Film Festival. The acceptance into the film festival exceeded my wildest expectations and allowed me to create a platform to increase awareness and understanding of what Men's Sheds are. Our documentary premiered in April 2023 along with other documentary shorts in Limerick City. In addition, the YouTube link to the documentary has received comments from viewers around the world, increasing the likelihood that more people understand what Men's Sheds are.

The Fulbright experience also encouraged me to seek out interdisciplinary collaborations and has expanded the way I think about research dissemination, particularly that art and film can be valuable mediums to tell the stories of older adults.

THE CONTINUED IMPACT OF FULBRIGHT

My Fulbright experience continues to impact me in significant and exciting ways. First, it has paved the way for exciting collaborations with colleagues in the US and Ireland. Likewise, it has encouraged me to think more globally about my research. I have always been interested in purpose and meaning in older adulthood, but I want to continue exploring these topics in diverse cultures and contexts. The Fulbright experience also encouraged me to seek out interdisciplinary collaborations and has expanded the way I think about research dissemination, particularly that art and film can be valuable mediums to tell the stories of older adults.

NOTES

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Dr. Heinz outside of the Dooradoyle Raheen Men's
Shed in Limerick City, Ireland

BIOGRAPHY

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