

THE YPN INTERVIEW:

Dr Cathy Gorman-Heenan, Northern Ireland



time in Egypt and the West Bank learning Arabic – although I admit I was never very good at it. My strong accent probably didn't help!

How did you get to where you are today?

By staying at university for what feels like forever! I have an undergraduate degree in politics from Queens University, Belfast; an MPhil from Oxford University; and a PhD in history and international affairs from the University of Ulster.

I also spent a year as a Kennedy Scholar at the Kennedy School of Government and Public Policy at Harvard University. This was one of my best years ever – I learned so much, took classes in negotiation analysis and Arabic, and made some great friends!

I then came back to Northern Ireland to look for work. I got a job as the researcher on INCORE's Conflict Data Service, an internet service on peace and conflict issues. I did some teaching while I was in the post, and things just developed from there.

What do you do?

I am a lecturer at the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland. I teach classes on government and public policy in the UK, but my areas of specialism are ethnic conflict, the management of peace processes, state crime, and conducting research in violently divided societies. I am also an associate of INCORE, a centre for international conflict research which is a joint initiative of the University of Ulster and the UN University in Tokyo.

What do you most enjoy about your job?

I get great job satisfaction from teaching. I always learn so much from my students, especially at the INCORE International Summer School – students of at least 20-30 nationalities take part each year!

Most of these students have worked 'in the field' in a range of conflict zones and so the exchange of experiences is always fascinating. Most of them come to Northern Ireland to understand more about the peace process here, so we spend a lot of time comparing cases and trying to draw lessons from them.

What is the greatest challenge that you face in your role?

Apart from balancing my teaching and research commitments, I would say that my biggest challenge is how to engage many of our younger 'non-specialist' students in appreciating the relevance of world politics. There is huge political apathy among young people; the falling turnout at elections in the UK is a stark illustration.

Finding the time and space for international field research is also challenging. Before I had a family, it was relatively easy for me to hop on a plane to conduct some research in the West Bank or Gaza for example. Now there needs to be a lot more planning on my part!

What inspires you to do what you do?

I was born and raised in Northern Ireland. I remember that, while I was at university here studying politics, a professor told me that the world was a much bigger place than Northern Ireland: if I wanted my opinions on this conflict to be taken seriously, I was advised, I would need points of reference from other conflicts around the world. So, I went to Oxford University and took an MPhil in modern Middle Eastern studies. I also spent

What has been your greatest professional achievement to date?

There are many things which I'm proud of in my career but the publication of my first book – *Political Leadership and the Northern Ireland Peace Process* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) – stands out. My teaching efforts have also resulted in some professional successes over the past two years. In 2006, I won the UK Political Studies Association's Bernard Crick Award for Outstanding Teaching in the new entrant category. Then, in 2007, I was awarded a University of Ulster Distinguished Teaching Fellowship Award.

What advice do you have for other young professionals wanting to follow a similar path to yours?

The very best teachers are those with plenty of field experience. It's hard to be passionate about something that you have not experienced first hand. There may be many other young professionals with similar educational qualifications; your 'edge' will always be determined by how much exposure you have had to the very issues that you are researching and teaching.

What do you think of the UN's role in fostering sustainable peace?

The UN primarily considers peacebuilding as an activity which occurs after preventive diplomacy, peacemaking and peacekeeping. But this linear view raises important questions. When, exactly, is the best time to build peace? After a cessation of physical violence? After a peace accord has been signed? At any point in the cycle of conflict?

The notion that there is a particular time to engage in peacebuilding initiatives is being challenged. Some argue that the narrow interpretation and operationalisation of peacebuilding activities in a post-conflict environment fails to acknowledge the fundamental reality that peacebuilding can take place in the absence of any formal peace agreement, or in the event that fledging peace agreements fail.

Any comments on this interview?

Send them to ypn@una.org.uk