

Times they are a-changing

“Derry is not a racist place but there are racists who live here.”

These are the words of Eddie Kerr, Director of [Seeds](#), an independent group working in mutual solidarity to promote and realise the human rights, equality and full integration in our society of asylum seekers, refugees and migrant workers.

Seeds is located in the One World Centre in Derry where people from multi-cultural backgrounds are encouraged to avail of the services offered by nine organisations housed there.

Headliners reporters spoke to a few of the foreign students at the centre and were glad to hear that none of them had personally experienced racial abuse. Eddie tells a different story: “There are 59 nationalities living in the multi-cultural centre of the city. In the last three months there have been 17 or 18 physical attacks in the city and there are certain hotspots where racist incidents happen. I try to advise people to stay away from these hotspots – some of them are in the communities where they live so we have to work closely with the PSNI.

“We have what’s called a ‘hate crime protocol’. People can come to us and we can report the crime on their behalf. If they don’t want to pursue the crime then we will pursue the crime. It’s almost like a conduit on their behalf. We challenge negatives in our society by being proactive not reactive. We go into schools and community groups and sometimes into places where we aren’t wanted.”

Eddie added: “Reporting a racist attack can be quite personal and difficult. No-one wants to put their hand up and say they were racially attacked. People look at statistics and may find that 10 or 15 per cent go through the courts and 80 or 85 per cent don’t get convicted.

“There are a lot of people who just don’t want to lift their head above the parapet. They don’t want to draw attention to themselves. I know members of the black community who just take verbal and racial abuse as something to be dealt with all their life.

“Derry people are quite simple in the way that they analyse society. Anybody who is white and speaks funny is from Poland, anyone who has a slant in their eyes is from China and anyone who is black is from Africa. In a way I don’t know if that’s ignorance or convenience, pigeon-holing or stereotyping, boxing off or putting people into categories. We like to deal with categories because categories are easier to work with. Is that racist? I don’t know. It’s a bit of ignorance, a lack of understanding, a lack of awareness, a lack of comprehension of ethnicity and differences that exists in our society.

“I think it’s about adapting to change – something different. None of us were born racist. We learn racist behaviour. None of us are born with racist tendencies –children don’t know the difference between black and white until they are told. Once you learn it you can unlearn it.”

Eddie assured: “Overall one of the things people who move here will tell us Derry is a fairly warm and welcoming city. But there are people in the city who hate everyone, it doesn’t matter what colour, creed or gender you are. You have that group that are just haters. People who hate anything different to themselves and who fear change. When you exploit those differences to be superior to someone else then racism is what happens. Some of them want to pass blame onto someone else because they can’t get a job or a house. They prescribe blame and then mix it with hate.”

“Some people in 2009 don’t even realise they have made a racist comment. I have been in the company of people who tell racist jokes. People still tolerate this. As for people who don’t like their communities changing, are they racist? Not all of them. Some of them are ignorant.”

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