Teenage relatives of terror victims meet in Belfast

Originally published: August 7, 2010 9:38 PM
Updated: August 7, 2010 9:54 PM
By JOIE TYRRELL joie.tyrrell@newsday.com

On a Belfast campus far from her Port Washington home, Sara Rodrigues, 16, shared that she still keeps her father's shirt in her closet.

Antonio Rodrigues was a Port Authority police officer who was killed in the Sept. 11 attack on the World Trade Center , and for the past week, Sara Rodrigues has talked about his loss with other teens from around the world who have lost an immediate family member to a terrorist incident.

"It's a tight-knit circle," Rodrigues said Friday, speaking from Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland . "It takes some time to open up but once you do, everything flows out . . . It's nice to know that you can really share everything."

The group of about 70 teens, about a third of whom are from Long Island, have gathered to form an international community called Project Common Bond under the auspices of Tuesday's Children, a nonprofit organization in Manhasset that serves the needs of the 9/11 community, said Terry Grace Sears, president of Tuesday's Children. The eight-day community-building and educational program, in partnership with the Harvard Law School Negotiation and Mediation Clinical Program, started a week ago and ends Sunday.

This is Common Bond's third year, but the first time it is being held outside of the country. Participants are from five nations - the United States, Spain, Israel , Ireland and Argentina - and also Northern Ireland and the Palestinian Authority .

"Today was a very emotional day for the kids," Sears said Friday from Belfast. "A real sort of breakdown where you just sort of see the weight . . . a lot of tears and a lot of sharing . . . They are seeing the courage of the kids that have lived with this longer.

"It becomes sort of viral, and they gather strength from one another and are sharing something as intimate as: I still have my father's shirt in my closet."

Led by a professional faculty, including psychologists, educators, social workers and health care professionals, the group held discussions on global leadership issues and participated in team-based activities designed to foster trust, healing, cooperation and communication. Rodrigues said she has taken peace classes in the morning and then camp activities in the afternoon.

"Here you see that there is a final resolution to all the conflict and it is really nice to speak with new people and get their perspective on it," said Rodrigues, who will be a junior at Paul D. Schreiber High School in the fall.

The idea came from participants from Tuesday's Children, and the first two conferences were held in Bryn Mawr, Pa.

"Two or three years ago, they came to us and said we would like to reach out to others that have had a similar loss to an act of terrorism," Sears said. "The first year, we had 50 kids from five countries and the bond was instant and really profound. We knew then we were onto something."