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WEST ROXBURY

## Catholic Memorial School eyes trip to Ireland

Posted by Matt Rocheleau December 8, 2010 01:13 PM

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(Courtesy: Joe McGonegal, Catholic Memorial)

Catholic Memorial has been invited to a unique two-week summer abroad program in Ireland. In the above video, guest instructor Andrea Mori teaches students in the high school's Irish studies course how to play the tin whistle.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Students at a private West Roxbury high school have been invited to a two-week summer program in Ireland that would be the first university-affiliated trip abroad for the Catholic all-male school, which began a more conscious effort this year to enhance global education offerings.

Sparked by student interest five years ago, [Catholic Memorial School](#) launched what is believed to be one of the only, if not the only, Irish-language-teaching programs at the secondary level in the United States, and the elective program has since been recognized by Irish government officials, according to school officials.

Mary Concannon, a full-time middle school counselor who teaches the Irish Studies curriculum, said she developed a relationship with administrators at Innisfree International College in Sligo, Ireland after she taught the Irish language, Gaeilge, for two weeks to American students studying there.

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Innisfree officials visited Catholic Memorial in October and began arranging the tentative plans for around 10 to 20 of the high school's students to partake in a two-week experience from mid- to late-June learning more about the country's language, history and culture through in-class and hands-on instruction, said Concannon. Catholic Memorial is the only high school invited to the program, she said.



(Joe McGonegal, CM)

Students met with Ireland's president in 2009.

"We're excited. The offer is there, and now we're trying to gauge whether there will be sufficient interest," said Concannon, who added the biggest potential hurdle would be paying the cost of such a venture.

Catholic Memorial students have traveled elsewhere domestically, as well as in Europe, Asia, South America and Central America, but students have never gone on an abroad trip affiliated with an international higher education institution, said Vice Principal James Keane. The college-preparatory school is hoping to make university-partnered travel a regular component of their Irish Studies curriculum.

Aside from Irish, students at the school can study Mandarin Chinese, Italian, Latin, Spanish and French. And, Catholic Memorial is reviewing and adapting curriculum to teach students school-wide more about international culture, history and language, said Keane who graduated from the school in 1982.

"We're very much about brining international students to CM and bringing CM students to the world," he said. "We are teaching students how to participate in a global economy."

Twenty-four international students are currently enrolled at the school, and officials hope expanding its global education efforts can help attract more, as well as increase interest from locally-residing students to travel.

"We always think travel is of great value," Keane said. "One of the hottest things for colleges right now is the junior year study abroad trip, and we're bringing that to the high school level."

Concannon was born and raised in Norwood, but, with both of her parents being natives of Ireland, she grew up in an Irish-speaking home. After graduating from Norwood High School, she said she moved to Ireland for five years, earning two degrees at the University College, Galway known today as the National University of Ireland, Galway.

She has worked at Catholic Memorial for 26 years, previously teaching Spanish among other subjects before becoming a guidance counselor for students in grades 7 through 8. She has been affiliated with the Irish Language Society of Boston, or Cumann na Gaeilge, for over 20 years and has taught the Irish language across New England – "from Portland, Maine to Canton, Massachusetts," she said.

Five years ago, in addition to her counselor duties, Concannon co-launched

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and began co-teaching Irish Studies as a world language course with Brother Anthony Cavet, who Concannon said is not co-teaching the program this year because of other schedule commitments.

She said between 70 and 100 students have taken Irish Studies since the course's inception. The idea for the program, which students sign up for in addition to a full course-load – schedule permitting – came from students who had confronted Concannon about starting either a class or club to learn more about Irish culture and history.

“The kids are the ones that started it ... so we ran with it,” she said. “We’ve sustained interest since the beginning. It’s a popular class, and it’s very well received.”

Aside from normal course work focused on the Irish language, history, culture and literature, students are often visited by guest lecturers or go on field trips related to the course.

Two years ago, a minister in the Irish government, [Éamon Ó Cuív](#), visited Catholic Memorial, and students also [met with the country's President Mary McAleese](#) at a local Irish cultural center later in 2008.

This fall Dennis Lehane, a Dorchester-born author with Irish heritage known for writing three novels that went Hollywood – “Mystic River,” “Gone, Baby, Gone” and “Shutter Island” – [visited the students](#) for a reading and question and answer session. Students also recently [learned to play Irish tin whistles](#) from a local musician and college professor, and Concannon is planning visits from guest instructors to discuss topics such as traditional Irish boatbuilding, cooking, art and dance.

Since it was founded, the course has taken students on visits to the Irish Pastoral Centre in Quincy and the Irish Cultural Centre of New England in Canton. Students from the program have been interviewed by Irish media, and, each St. Patrick's Day, students from the program recite prayers in Irish during the Boston Archdiocese's celebratory service at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in the South End.

The school has seen a mix of students signing up for the course open to upperclassmen – most join from an eagerness to learn more about the native country of their parents, grandparents or more distant family members, while others who have no ancestral tie to Ireland, join simply out of an interest in and curiosity about the island European nation.

“It's very rewarding. Many are reconnecting with parents and grandparents and with relatives in Ireland,” she said.

Many of alums of the program have continued studying about Ireland in college, including some who have traveled to the country as part of their higher education experience.

Though both Irish and English are considered first official languages by Ireland's government, English is more popularly spoken. After a massive famine plagued the country during the 1840s, the Irish language began to lose popularity to English as many Irish-speaking people either died or emigrated.







“The language being taught in [American] high school is very, very rare,” she said. “It's a very difficult language to learn, but the interest is there,” which makes it less of a challenge and more fun to teach.

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