

## Beach holidays bring sunshine into the lives of children the Tiger ignored

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In post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, a summer holiday is still an extraordinary treat for some of those who didn't reap the benefits. The Society of St Vincent de Paul finds that the simple beach holidays it provides for children are much in demand, but imperilled by a lack of volunteers.

Lee (9) has his bags packed "a week before" he's due to go for his week's holiday by the sea in Balbriggan, north Co Dublin.

From Ballyfermot, the wiry, freckle-faced boy seems almost in a rush to tell how "deadly" his week is going to be in Sunshine House. "My cousin told me about this place. He was telling me there was a playground and swings and a roundabout and an obstacle course. He said we go to the beach every day. And play soccer and basketball. And we do talent shows and watch films. It's great so it is," he beams.

Sunshine House, a large house on a hectare in the coastal town, provides week-long holidays for children, aged seven to 12, from disadvantaged parts of Dublin, Meath, Wicklow, Kildare and, recently, from Moyross in Limerick, through the summer months. Each week from May to August, 130 children are provided with food, board, €10 spending money, the chance to meet new friends and full-time, positive adult attention. It is all free to the families.

Sitting beside Lee, with big, blue eyes and tousled blond hair, is Adam, (8), from Seán MacDermott Street. "It's great and the people are very nice. They give us ice-pops."

The society bought the 18th-century home in 1927. It has been running the holidays since 1935, explains Brian O'Toole, a primary school teacher in Dublin, who effectively heads up the operation. Between January and April he organises the fundraising, and then the recruitment of volunteers, the ordering of supplies - which include clothes, shoes and toiletries, as even in 2006 some children arrive with only the clothes they are wearing - as well as footballs, buckets and spades and spot prizes for competitions and the recruitment of staff to cook and clean.

He estimates each child's holiday costs €350, given that the costs are €45,500 per week or €546,000 a year. They rely totally on fundraising, especially on the Advocate collection outside churches every Palm Sunday. "It's fragile enough. If we have bad rain on Palm Sunday the collection can be affected." The society also receives bequests.

Tom McMahon, a medical student who volunteers every year, explains children might be referred to Sunshine by their local VdeP conference (branch). "Also I would go into some of the flat complexes or areas and knock on doors and see who might be interested. For some this is the only break from the flats or the city they'll get all year."

Every week, says O'Toole, there are three or four mothers with children who arrive up, without a ticket and their child's bag packed, "begging to be brought along too".

"The need for Sunshine might not be as great as in the past, but it is still a vital break for some of these kids. There are an increasing number of immigrant children coming too - we have South African, Polish kids this week, for example - and they in many ways are the new poor. They don't have grannies to go and stay with or aunts down the country. They are much more isolated as well as being poor, for want of a better word."

Though people are "very generous" with contributing money, the society is finding it increasingly difficult to get volunteers to help with their time, he says. It has had to cancel one of its weeks this year. "All you need is a sense of humour, a love of kids, and a lot of energy."

Anyone interested in volunteering for a week at Sunshine House should call 01 8198430, Tuesday or Wednesday evenings.