Meghan Cappel

Professor Grace

Irish in America

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Michelle Duffy

Age: 41

Irish Female

Project Manager at Google

Family friend

Wanted to escape the depressing life in Ireland

What would it be like to move to the United States after living in Ireland for over eighteen years? How would you handle the transition? What expectations would you have, and what if they weren’t true? Michelle Duffy, an Irish immigrant, lived outside Dublin, Ireland until the age of 22. She described life in Ireland at that time to be consistent with two themes, unemployment and immigration. Ms. Duffy knew that she needed a college degree to find work in the United States or the United Kingdom. She attended Navan High School, and then studied computer science at Queens University at Belfast. Ms. Duffy moved to the United States with her husband in 1995. They currently reside in Seattle, Washington with their two sons. Upon arrival in the United States and after living here for over 15 years, Ms. Duffy has changed her opinions and expectations about her new home.

Right after college, Ms. Duffy found a job working for a bank in Ireland. She was given the option to enter the Donnelly Visa Lottery, which offered green cards to a select few people. Since she was chosen to receive a green card, Ms. Duffy and her husband travelled to the United States to escape the depressing state of Ireland. She stressed to me that the perceptions she and her husband held about the American people were very wrong. In Ireland, they were used to seeing “tour bus” Americans, and she described them as fat and loud. Ms. Duffy said that the image that the rest of the world has of Americans and the United States is very different from reality. She admitted that it was wrong to make generalizations about Americans, but the majority of the visitors from the United States left bad impressions with the Irish. While talking with her, she confessed that her husband was afraid that all citizens of the United States owned and carried a gun at all times. While this is obviously not true, Ms. Duffy is always a little perturbed when walking in Wal-Mart or a sporting goods store and seeing guns out on display. After living here for over 15 years, she sees that Americans are genuine, loving people. Americans are also more conservative and religious than she had imagined.

Although Ms. Duffy has not travelled to many places in the United States, she has noticed that certain ethnic groups tend to settle in certain regions of the country. From what she has noticed, the Irish generally tend to settle in Chicago or take up residence on the East Coast. This is one of the reasons that she and her family chose to settle on the West Coast, as they are always looking for adventure and enjoy travelling. Since she and her family have journeyed by car up and down the West Coast, she noted that many Asians, whether Chinese or Japanese have settled in the area. While Ms. Duffy resides in Seattle, her family is always moving about the world. Just last year, she and her husband pulled their children out of school in order to visit 26 different countries around the globe.

When I asked Ms. Duffy if she considered herself an Irish-American, she surprised me a bit with her response. She stuttered before saying that she wouldn’t consider herself to be an Irish-American, but just Irish. Ms. Duffy frequently travels back to Ireland to visit family, but she has picked up so much of an American accent that Ireland natives immediately know she lives in the United States. Since her two children were born in the United States, they are very much on the edge of the Irish versus American debate. Technically, they are United States citizens, but since both of their parents are from Ireland, it is difficult to label them. Her rationale is that after two generations of being born in the United States, a person would call herself an American. If she wanted to further define and say Irish-American, Ms. Duffy said she doesn’t have a problem with it. It is perfectly valid for Americans to define themselves with their heritage, although it is a very American thing to do. As the United States is a melting pot, it is important for people to remember where their families came from and we do this by saying Irish-American, African-American, etc. Although it may seem strange to outsiders, Ms. Duffy said in general, the people of Ireland wouldn’t be offended. They might actually be proud that we want to associate our heritage with them.

While the move to the United States may have been in search of a better life, Ms. Duffy found a land of countless opportunities. The United States is one of the few countries where people can invent themselves. She stated that anyone who immigrates to the United States who is willing to work will be able to achieve anything they want. Since she was willing to work hard to be productive in her work, Ms. Duffy never felt discriminated against in the United States. She was welcomed as an equal and was never denied any opportunity for which she was qualified. Ms. Duffy currently serves as a project manager at Google, and she would tell any Irish student to get a college degree before coming to the United States. She gave one exception to this rule. If the student is planning to major in computer science, that degree should be obtained in the United States. Moving to the United States has provided Ms. Duffy and her family the opportunity to create a better, more optimistic future in work, education, and travel.