

Title: Sister Cities International: Cultivating Youth, Relationships, and Programs that Last

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Established by President Eisenhower in 1956, Sister Cities International (SCI) is a long standing organization focused on fostering global peace and diplomatic relations that lead to greater appreciation of cultural differences. SCI has been working to achieve this goal through exchanges of business leaders, government officials, and other prominent community members between recognized sister city partnerships.

In an effort to promote youth engagement, a local chapter of SCI in Anderson, South Carolina partnered with United Way of Anderson County (UWAC) and Anderson's Youth Volunteer Corp to break from their traditional exchange models and design a collaborative international experience that blended civic tourism, sightseeing, and service. This initiative, developed in large part through the vision of the UWAC President and Chief Professional Officer and member of the SCI Board of Directors, Carol Burdette, was aimed at bringing adults and youth together to cultivate a rising generation of active community members and civic tourists. In Burdette's words:

"If we're not cultivating young professionals and youth, we are losing the future of our organization. We must find ways to incorporate youth in Sister Cities' activities or there won't be a Sister Cities."

How did Burdette and SCI engage their youth? The youth and a small group of local community members traveled to Anderson's Sister City, Carrickfergus, Northern Ireland, to partake in a service project that allowed for a unique cross-generational experience. The project took place at Kilcreggan Urban Organic Farm, which employs adults with various learning disabilities in order to help them develop employability and other life skills, while also supporting community needs for fresh, local food. The farm boasts several green houses as well as an array of farm animals. The visiting group and local community members spent time working on the farm and taking care of the animals together over the course of the week-long trip.

In addition to working with Kilcreggan employees and volunteers, the group was hosted by and served with the local youth council. Despite being "worlds apart" the Anderson youth and adults agreed that *servng* with the council helped the young group to connect and build relationships that endure.

In the end, while the group dynamics were difficult to navigate at times—traveling with eight adults and seven youth—the mixing of generations allowed the teens to feel safe and confident while traveling internationally (many for the first time), to see models of independent travelers, and to increase their interest in future travel.



Picture 1: Anderson youth participating in team-building activities with the local Carrickfergus Youth Council and members on the farm.



Picture 2: The youth were helping create a banner for the going-away dinner held at the farm before the Anderson group had to leave.