

Stimulate curiosity, be open-minded



Irish Ambassador Aingeal O'Donoghue, fourth from left, and five elementary and middle school students pose for a photo at the Kevin O'Rourke Library of the Irish Embassy in Seoul, Aug. 8. / Korea Times

Ambassador gives Irish hospitality to aspiring diplomats

By Kang Hyun-kyung

Diplomats face numerous unexpected challenges when they serve in foreign countries, where they may have to accustom themselves to very different cultural and socioeconomic settings.

Addressing five aspiring young diplomats at her office on August 8, Irish Ambassador Aingeal O'Donoghue encouraged them to train themselves to be open-minded and curious about the world if they wanted to pursue diplomatic careers.

"You have to want to know about and get to know about the country where you are posted," she told five children during an interview with them. "That's a really important quality."

The children — three elementary school students and two middle school students, ranging in age from 9 to 13 — live in Bundang, a district within Seongnam, Gyeonggi Province.

The five children sat down with the Irish ambassador after their request of an in-person meeting with her was accepted.

Showing unique Irish hospitality, the ambassador began her opening remarks in the Irish language. "Cead mile failte," she said, and then translated it into English: "a hundred thousand welcomes."

The Irish envoy listed her previous foreign postings — Madrid, Washington, D.C., New Delhi and Brussels — to help the children understand why cross-cultural understanding and curiosity matter for diplomats.

"All those postings are very different," she said. "Each time you have to master your new job, learn a lot about language and culture to get to know the country you are based in. That's a challenge."

"One of the hardest things being Irish ambassador in Korea is that the two countries are very different. So to work here successfully, you have to understand Korean culture and the way people want to do things and correct the way you do things. That takes a lot of effort."

The envoy stressed that a thorough understanding and accurate knowledge of their own country and its culture were also important for diplomats.

"The thing actually people don't always think about is you have to know your own country really well when you are representing your country abroad," she said.

"It could be governmental policies or it could be culture or have you ever visited other parts of your country. All that, which is very intangible, is very important."

During the meeting, she took questions from the children and gave answers based on her extensive experience in diplomatic service.

The five children were curious about the role of an ambassador, how they could prepare for diplomatic careers, and what kinds of experiences would help them get that plum job in the future.

Ambassador O'Donoghue said diplomats needed to be multitasking because their duties varied so much. Diplomats have to protect their nationals overseas, promote their culture, and play a role in facilitating trade with the host government.

"But it is a huge honor when your government decided to send you as an ambassador to another country to represent your culture," she said.

When asked for information about Ireland, the envoy said her country was home to numerous Nobel Prize winners and was the only country to have a musical instrument — the harp — as its national symbol.

Historically, the envoy said Korea and Ireland were similar in that they had experienced many foreign invasions, but that culturally they were very different.

Inspiring

Kang Ye-eun, one of the five students, said the Irish ambassador's presentation was "inspiring" and had given her a deeper understanding of the diplomatic service field as well as of Ireland.

"Personally, the opportunity to meet the ambassador made a huge difference in my view of the job. She encouraged me to become more interested in the actual job and inspired me," the middle school student said after the meeting.

"I thought that Ireland was a really interesting country, which is quite similar to our own country."

Woo Min-joo, a fifth-grader, said she came to realize that being a diplomat was tougher than she had initially thought.

"Before meeting the ambassador, I was not so sure of what ambassadors do. But after her presentation, I realized that it is a hard job to do," she said.

Another fifth-grader, Park Woo-min, said after the meeting the Irish ambassador he was motivated to study English harder so he could better prepare for his future career.