“Twenty years from now, you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn’t do than by the ones you did” – Mark Twain

It’s break time and the theme music from Dances with Wolves is playing over the loudspeakers. The boys are heading out to play in the November sunshine. There is no bell; John Barry’s soundtrack punctuates our day.

It’s spring in Buenos Aires and my wife, Nan and I are enjoying a career break here with our 12 year old son, Darragh.

A mad idea!
Fifteen years ago, we took our first career break to go on a round-the-world trip. It didn’t disappoint. We were particularly taken with Latin America, where we fell in love with Argentina, Chile and Nicaragua. We have cherished memories of that time but the travel bug had bitten and we were itching once more. We often dreamed of heading off again and sharing our adventures with Darragh. A mad idea! Especially at our ages when we should be settled and sensible. But the itch lingered and we realised that it was now or never. Darragh finished primary in Ballygarvan NS, and his classmates were moving on to 12 different schools. It was a natural break and he was young for secondary school. He could take a gap year, return to secondary and still be the same age as his classmates.

I am principal of Blarney Street CBS in Cork. I love my job and school but principalship is demanding and all-consuming and the thought of a breather to try something different was attractive. When I told my chairperson, deputy principal and staff, they were encouraging and supportive and fortunately were also willing and capable to step up. The mad idea was becoming a reality.

Explore. Dream. Discover!
Luckily, the Edmund Rice Schools Trust (ERST) had been developing links between Christian Brothers schools. A new initiative The concepts are very new to them so they found the PDST website a great resource.

Edmund Rice Education Beyond Borders (EREBB) sought to share the vision of Blessed Edmund Rice and promote partnership between schools nationally and internationally. Through this initiative, an opportunity arose to base myself in Buenos Aires for six months.

So we took the plunge, leased out our house and took Twain’s advice to throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover!

Our school is Cardenal Newman College, a Christian Brothers’ college situated just outside Buenos Aires. It operates in the Edmund Rice tradition and values academic achievement, faith formation, sport, community and parental involvement. The last two Christian Brother principals were Corkmen: Br John Burke from Shanballymore and Br Paul Keohane from the Lough in Cork. So heading out, I hoped that the staff would be able to understand my Cork accent Spanish.

Nervous start
When we arrived at the start of August we were really very nervous especially about how our son would fit in and get on in school, which starts at eight and finishes at four, so it’s quite a long day. We had organised an apartment downtown near the famous Recoleta cemetery and during those new, first few days, we soon figured out how to navigate our new morning routine.

We caught the school bus, or combi, at 7 a.m., from the city. We walked 14 blocks to the combi, admiring the city, bathed in early morning light. The sky over Avenida Coronel Díaz was pink as Porteños set off on their morning routines. The city was alive. On Avenida de Libertador, 11 lanes of traffic revved at red lights as the three of us laughed and raced across, tracking our 29 second digitalized countdown. Black and yellow taxis competed with orange school buses for lane superiority. Yellow city bikes spun along cycle lanes, sharing with joggers. Dogs were lovingly led through streets and parks while inside plush lobbies parents waited with pupils for school transport. Outside there were many homeless sleeping under blankets.

Monica, the combi driver, welcomed us by name and chatted cheerfully to us as she carefully negotiated the busy Pan Americano Highway to San Isidro. The bus was full of sleepy students catching a last few winks before school.

We needn’t have been nervous about fitting in. We received the most heartwarming welcome from staff and
students. They were really delighted we had come to their school; they hugged and kissed us on the cheek. Both the men and women!

We’ve been here four months now and it’s been wonderful to be in a country for a long time and really get to know people and understand the culture.

**Irish connections**
The school community is enchanted by Ireland and is very curious about Irish history and customs. Many staff have Irish surnames: Valerie Murray teaches fifth grade, Maria Kenny teaches sixth. The school secretary is Maureen Flynn.

On roll, there are families of McCamless, Scallys, Duggans, Lawlors and even Lynches. All of them are Argentine with Irish roots going back generations; there has been little recent Irish immigration here.

**School life**
As it’s a bilingual school, there are two staffs. Until noon, the curriculum is delivered entirely through Spanish. These teachers leave to teach in different schools in the afternoon. They tell me that it’s exhausting teaching two shifts but teachers are poorly paid in Argentina so they must work extra hours to make ends meet. There is little regard for teaching as a profession here, they lament.

At midday the English primary staff arrive; the same students but a new staff and deputy principal. It was confusing at the start but I’m used to it now. Like their colleagues, these English speaking teachers generally arrive from a morning’s work elsewhere.

Teachers have different qualifications here depending on the course studied so most are only qualified to teach either in the Spanish section or the English section.

The primary and secondary school are connected by a central hall and there are a huge number of teachers in the secondary too, as most teachers have only part-time hours. In total, 180 teachers work in both schools.

Lunchtime is very interesting, the cafeteria is like a city with so many people coming and going. The food is excellent and staff and students lunch together.

Everyone is welcoming, and it’s a great opportunity to meet and chat with different people and hear their stories.

The three of us are enjoying the experience in our own way. I work mornings in the secondary and spend my time preparing small groups for oral English exams such as IELTS or Trinity. I do team-teaching and substitute work too so it’s very varied.

Later, in the primary I support the principal and deputy principal who are very interested in Blarney Street’s reading initiatives; they’ve asked me to talk to the staff about graded readers, station teaching and Reading Recovery.

The concepts are very new to them so they found the PDST website a great resource. The school has introduced station teaching so at least I feel that my visit has been of some value.

My wife, Nan, has taken a break from teaching and has relaxed and been involved with some of the school’s work to support the needy in the barrios.

There is a huge social divide in Argentina so Newman is very aware of its Edmund Rice ethos and has many pastoral and social justice projects in operation. We both have had the lovely experience of helping out in a less fortunate school nearby that Newman supports.

**Having a ball**
Daragh is having a ball. I see him outside now smiling with his buddies in the playground. I hope that 20 years from now, he will have happy memories, friends and new skills from his travels in Latin America. Three of us having a great break, it hasn’t disappointed, Mr Twain!

**Billy Lynch** teaches in Scoil Chomhthílle BNS, Co Cork. You can follow the adventures of Billy, Nan and Daragh on https://ygesouth.wordpress.com
Teachers have their say on the curriculum