

**Dromore Resident and Queen's PhD candidate Paula Guzzanti wins  
Higginson Leadership Award of the year  
with a *Dance and Mindfulness* project for Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica**



Figure 1 Higginson Leadership award Trustee Eileen Murphy and Karl Oakes give Paula her certificate in Queen's University Belfast at this year Scholarship Winners celebration.

Dromore resident, dance artist and PhD candidate in Dance from Queen's University Belfast wins the prestigious Higginson Leadership award of the year. The prize is given to students who demonstrate social responsibility and inspirational leadership through the creation of an original project to be carried out overseas.

Paula's project *Dance, Movement, and Meditation to All* will offer psycho-social support to Nicaraguan refugees living in Costa Rica. Her project—which compliments her studies for her doctorate—will address mental health and physical wellbeing of people who are in a migrant condition, without access to healthcare and/or employment.

Paula explained that the motivation for this project came from her understanding of the health benefits and empowerment that participation in movement practices like dance can bring. In settled societies, people have access to music-making, to dance and arts as a form of entertainment and self-expression. In areas of conflict and for displaced communities, these essential activities and forms of social engagement are not available.

Paula became aware of the political and social crisis that erupted in Nicaragua in April 2018 which led to the displacement of 40,000 Nicaraguan nationals to neighbouring Costa Rica.

Whilst Costa Rica affords them a place of safety, few are in employment, access to formal and informal health services and support is limited. This is especially acute for women and young people who are not in education, employment or training. With this in mind, Paula sent an open call to organisations based in Costa Rica who might offer opportunity for partnership to deliver this unique approach to humanitarian aid. *Dialogo para la Democracia*, a platform led by Nicaraguan women, and *SOSNicaragua*, two grassroots organisations who are working to create better conditions for the Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica, acknowledged and validated the need for such mental health and wellbeing support. Project coordinator of *Dialogo para Democracia*, Edipcia Dubón said that ‘we clearly identify that the refugee population requires forms of support that we ourselves as a team are not ready for an experience of this kind, so we consider your support very valuable and we appreciate your interest.’

Paula's project will involve a four-week campaign on mental and physical wellbeing, including Dance, Tai Chi, and Mindfulness sessions for adults. In addition, she will design and deliver a *Community Dance Leadership training programme* for women and young people aged 18-25 who had been forced to leave their higher education studies because of their fleeing the Nicaraguan crisis. Paula envisions empowering refugees so that they can become leaders in their own communities. The project's legacy will involve an online educational platform with teaching resources and a plan for continuous training support through online classroom sessions.

Higginson Leadership award Trustee Karl Oakes said that ‘*On behalf of the Higginson Leadership Award Trustees, I would like to wish Paula the very best with her upcoming project involving dance and mindfulness. We look forward to learning about the undoubted impact she will have on the Nicaraguan women refugee community in Cost Rica who have little access to health services – a great initiative from an inspiring student at Queen's University Belfast.*’

Paula is committed to bring her learning experience back to Northern Ireland. She is keen to deliver workshops with the aim of sharing the outcomes of her project and inspiring young people and women's groups. Paula invites groups to get in touch directly with her through the project's website [www.danzaybienestar.com](http://www.danzaybienestar.com) or by email to [participa@danzaybienestar.com](mailto:participa@danzaybienestar.com)

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#### **Notes for editors:**

- Paula was born in Buenos Aires (Argentina) and moved to Ireland in 2005.
- In 2009, she obtained a Masters by Research in Peace and Conflict Resolution Studies from Trinity College Dublin.
- With her husband, Martin, they made Dromore Co. Down, their home since 2011.
- Paula is a former Sports NI Active Communities Coach employed by the Down Rural Community Network and acknowledges the great support of both organizations in her development as a dance and movement professional.

- Pauls is a supported artist of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, and dance artist in residence at the Down Arts Centre, where she currently delivers Tai Chi and Mindfulness programmes.

**For more information visit:**

- <https://www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/degreeplus/RouteA/HigginsonLeadershipAward/>
- [www.danzaybienestar.com](http://www.danzaybienestar.com)
- [https://pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/en/persons/paula-guzzanti\(462586ff-66e2-46bd-905b-d15546b606ed\).html](https://pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/en/persons/paula-guzzanti(462586ff-66e2-46bd-905b-d15546b606ed).html)
- <http://countydownruralcommunitynetwork.com>