Reflections on Ireland and Kindred Spirits

1) Did seeing the Irish landscape open up thoughts, perspectives, understandings?

Absolutely. Standing in Ireland's lush green fields and along its rugged coasts, I couldn't help but think of how land changes over time, as do people. The Choctaw people and the Irish people both know hardship and resilience, and seeing their landscape really made me stop and wonder if I would have kept going or given up in the face of all the trials and tribulations both experienced. It was humbling to realize that across the ocean, our stories still speak to one another.

2) Do you see reflections of the connection in modern Ireland?

Yes. I think the most eye opening part of the trip is how deeply connected our two countries are. The connection isn't just history—it's alive. I felt it in the way people welcomed us, in the conversations we had, and in the reverence shown at Kindred Spirits and other national monuments. Ireland remembers, and not in a distant, historical way, but as a living bond of friendship, shared memories, and support that continues to this day.

3) Did folks in many places already know about the gift?

Many did, yes. When we mentioned the Choctaw gift during the famine, people lit up. Some even shared stories of learning about it in school. Others thanked us personally, which touched me more than I can put into words. It reminded me how an act of generosity, even one made nearly two centuries ago, can ripple forward into hearts today. I think what has surprised me most was the number of people from the United States who have talked about the gift and have actually traveled to Ireland to see it.

4) What did the trip mean to you, personally, and as a representative of the Choctaw Nation?

Personally, it was one of the most moving experiences of my life. To stand before Kindred Spirits with our native Choctaws, and as someone who teaches young people about resilience and history, was powerful beyond measure. Hearing our group leader, Ashley Gragg, speak on behalf of our nations and this beautiful tribute brought tears to my eyes. I was so proud of her dedication, commitment, and hard work that helped make this dream a reality for us. I felt the weight of the ancestors and the gratitude of the Irish people all at once. Representing the Choctaw Nation in **that** space filled me with pride and a renewed commitment to live generously.

5) What surprised you about the Irish?

Their humor! Even on the very first day, the way they spoke—with their colorful language and quick wit—felt both different and familiar. It reminded me so much of home, where we, too, have our own way of bending the English language to make it ours. That connection through laughter and expression surprised and delighted me.

6) What do you see as the future of the connection?

I see it only growing stronger. Our nations are tied not only by a moment of history, but by shared values of generosity, resilience, and community. I believe that future generations—both Irish and Choctaw—will continue to honor this friendship with exchanges, visits, and shared stories. It's a bridge that will not crumble.

7) Is there anything you'd do differently in future—or now like to do—in the wake of your trip?

If I could do anything differently, it would be to linger longer in the quiet places, to write more in the moment, and to capture every feeling before it slipped away. Now that I am home, I'd like to help keep the story alive—sharing it with my students, my community, and anyone who needs to be reminded that kindness can change the course of history. I would definitely like to come back when my grandchildren are old enough to experience Ireland and appreciate their heritage.

8) How did traveling with classmates, students, and parents affect your understanding of teamwork, friendship, or shared cultural experiences?

Traveling together made everything richer. Each of us came with different perspectives—some wide-eyed students seeing the world for the first time, parents soaking up history alongside their children, and classmates sharing inside jokes in brand-new places. What struck me was how quickly we became more than just a group of travelers; we became a team, a family of our own, if you will. We helped each other when someone was tired, we laughed together when we got lost, and we shared the awe of standing in front of Kindred Spirits. Experiencing another culture side by side deepened our friendships and reminded me that connection isn't just found in the places we visit, but in the people we share those places with. Experiencing together the deeply moving and breathtakingly beautiful landscape, the delicious food, the rich culture, the unique history, and the kindness of so many strangers was something that truly cannot be put into words and will never be forgotten.