

TREOIR



SOBER ST PATRICK'S DAY®

– A NOVEL NEW WAY TO HELP GROW COMHALTAS!?

William Spencer Reilly

After Selling Out In Advance for Three Consecutive Years in New York and Having Expanded to 5 Cities, Philadelphia's Delaware Valley Branch CCE is Next Up In 2015!!

The thing I like best about all the press coverage we've received since 2012, is this year's sub-head from The Irish Echo's article, 'Sober St Patrick's Day® – The Ultimate Family-Friendly Party On St Patrick's Day!'

But, I'm getting ahead of myself...

I knew we were on to something in 2012 when Niall O'Dowd, publisher of The Irish Voice, gave us the whole front page of the pre-St Patrick's Day edition of his national newspaper. Then, in the following week, Terry Golway of The Irish Echo wrote, 'This is precisely the kind of event that has been sorely lacking in New York for, oh, approximately 250 years or so.' I could hardly believe my eyes. That was just days before our inaugural event.

Then, we sold out in advance. People really began to take notice. Lots more press followed. PIX-11 TV News also covered us. A producer's dream. Rave reviews. Amazing buzz. An idea was born. And, all put together in seven weeks, but that's another story.



Club Time



Civil Band Musicians, from left: Michael Fee, Wan Golt, Hilley Richardson, Brian Conway, John Whelan and Brendan Dolan.

Thanks in large part to Noel Kilkenny, New York's Consul General of Ireland, who went out of his way to bring with him Joan Burton, Ireland's Minister for Social Protection and Alex Attwood, Northern Ireland's Minister for the Environment, Sober St Patrick's Day® went through the roof in its first event. Ms. Burton said, 'This should cross the Atlantic to Ireland!' Since then, Sober St Patrick's Day® has only gotten bigger and better in our second and third years.

In 2013, thanks in part to The Lord Mayor of Belfast, Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, The Belfast City Council voted to incorporate Sober St Patrick's Day®



into their three day St Patrick's Festival and held an outdoor concert for 5,000 people! They did it again in 2014, once more embracing the family-friendly atmosphere of this curious new movement.

In a smaller fashion, Casper, Wyoming also got on board these last two years and held their modest version of Sober St Patrick's Day® for about 100 people – mostly people in recovery and their families – with a total budget of about \$1,000. Both TV stations showed up at their party in Casper this year, but most importantly, they've established an inexpensive model to do this event. In 2014, Cleveland, Ohio (which also sold out in advance) and Richmond, Virginia signed up as well – putting us in five cities, so far. Each city's event is different, and so the amount each party costs varies enormously.

For 2015, our mantra is 'Philadelphia Here We Come!' as Katherine Ball-Weir, Chair of the Delaware Valley Branch CCÉ, has arranged for her Branch of Comhaltas to host Sober St Patrick's Day® in the 'City of Brotherly Love.' Large or small, Sober St Patrick's Day®, is designed to be easily adjustable in size and scope – from large cities to much smaller towns, wherever there are families and kids, people in recovery and their families, as well as people tired of the day being hijacked by drunkenness.

As for 'The Main Event' in the Big Apple, here's a quick update since selling out in advance in 2012 and 2013. New York City, March 17, 2014: Having outgrown our original venue, we moved to a larger space, also near the parade route, and sold out in advance again. The line-up: John Whelan (eight time All-Ireland Button Accordion Champion), Brian Conway (five time All-Ireland Fiddle Champion), The University College Dublin Choral Scholars (Ireland's best collegiate choral group), Frances Black (star vocalist), Haley Richardson (11 year old All-Ireland Fiddle Champion), The Tulla Pipe Band (Co. Clare), Malachy McCourt (himself), the Donny Golden School of Irish Dance (some of the world's best step dancers), Donie Carroll (guitarist/vocalist), Marianne McShane (CCÉ gold medal seanachie), other All-Star Céili musicians Brendan Dolan, Michael Fee and Ivan Goff, Piper Lisa Farber, and for the Kids' Program – The Fee Sisters, along with Haley, Donie, and Miss USA, Erin Brady.

Families and kids having a rip roarin' time listening to a line-up of world-class entertainers. Brian Conway described it as

'an absolute dream, a true oasis to perform at, instead of the usual insanity where so few people are ever able to hear you – or even bother to listen to you!' Each of the cities that has hosted a Sober St Patrick's Day® event has spotlighted local talent, whether it be step dancers, musicians and singers, bands, pipers or the tremendous wealth of talent that we in NYC are fortunate to have access to. The only 'requirement' is that the event features great Irish music and entertainment at an affordable price!



Fintan Leamy (foreground) and The Tulla Pipe Band from Co. Clare performing at Sober St. Patrick's Day @event in New York City (Photo: Yetkin Yuce)

OK, enough bragging, but just in case I'm about to lose you, Sober St Patrick's Day® is not against people having a drink or two on St Patrick's Day. We're simply against people using St Patrick's Day as an excuse to get drunk, and making us all look ridiculous. We don't want to rain on anyone's parade; we simply want to 'reclaim the true spirit of the day' and to show the Irish in our best light, instead of our worst. For too many people and for too long, St Patrick's Day has become a license to get drunk. Is binge drinking what we really want to keep modeling for our kids?!!

Focusing instead on the depth of the culture of the Irish people – our music, dance, song, comedy, and storytelling in a cross-generational atmosphere – is what this is all about. And, '...changing the perception and experience of what St Patrick's Day can be' is another integral part of our Mission Statement. A tall order indeed, but amazingly it's starting to happen. It's high time we took back the day – and also took back our pride.

The recovery community and nationally known treatment centers have been at the core of this movement from day one. (I almost lost a family member to addiction nine years ago, and that's what changed my life). And many of these famous organizations will help connect our future cities with the local folks in recovery and their families. Including that constituency is crucial to our mission. Wherever they are, and believe me, they are everywhere, they'll come out in droves, since so many of them have simply abandoned the holiday. All of these organizations, as well as our corporate sponsors PepsiCo and the American Ireland Fund, are found on our web site. www.SoberStPatricksDay.org.

The rest, they say is ...

But, not quite.

Sure, this is a Himalayan, up-hill climb. And although the first few steps have been swift and sure – we're not even at the foothills yet. We're 'only' in six cities so far. So, what about Dublin? Or Derry? Or Boston? Or Chicago?! Or equally important, how about the many small cities and towns where the Diaspora is found craving the need to 'reclaim the true spirit of the day'? Don't get me wrong; although none of this has been easy, all of it has been immensely gratifying. And that leads me to end with the 'not quite' part.

Because it's here where I think Comhaltas might come in. When Katharine Ball-Weir approached us about Philadelphia, another watershed moment took place – all thanks to Maureen Donachie, our new Associate Producer in 2014. Maureen has been involved with Comhaltas North America for thirty-five years. She is currently the Chair and PRO of Craobh Úll Mór CCÉ in New York City and an active member of the Mid-Atlantic Regional CCÉ Board. Maureen approached me and said, 'Many branches of Comhaltas could really use Sober St Patrick's Day® as a great way to celebrate the day and showcase their in-house talent in order to grow their year-round work. Their branches could benefit; as each one obviously focuses on 'the best in Irish music and dance', and many of my colleagues are sick and tired of the lack of focus on Irish culture on St Patrick's Day. Just about everywhere the day's been hijacked by ridiculous behavior that just makes us all look bad!'

Curious. That's exactly what Tim Quinn, Chair of the Milford, CT. P.V. O'Donnell Branch CCÉ said when I recently shared this idea with him.

So, if you're interested in hosting Sober St Patrick's Day® in your town or city, please contact Maureen Donachie at Maureen@SoberStPatricksDay.org. For your reference, our License Guidelines can be found on the 'Other Cities' page on our website, www.SoberStPatricksDay.org. This document will provide the guidelines to follow for use of our registered name. Permission is then required, as we need to protect this important new brand. By the way, Maureen doesn't miss a trick, and she's very happy to explain everything that we will provide to help you get up and running. I suggest that you consider starting small and then just let the miracles happen!

As I said, 'Philadelphia Here We Come!'

– William Spencer Reilly,
 Founder/Producer Sober St Patrick's Day®
www.SoberStPatricksDay.org