

Detroit St. Patrick's Parade honors fallen officer from Livingston County

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With the sound of bagpipes and school bands wafting through downtown Detroit, a giant shamrock emblazoned with "Sgt. Patrick O'Rourke" will hang over the start of today's 55th annual St. Patrick's Parade.

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It is a tribute to the fallen West Bloomfield Township policeman, Tyrone Township resident, Hartland High School graduate, husband and father killed in the line of duty in September.

The event was planned before organizers realized the parade's anniversary matched O'Rourke's badge, No. 55.

"I just couldn't believe it," his widow, Amy O'Rourke, said during Friday's painting of the shamrocks at the plaza, where the parade will begin, at Sixth and Bagley streets, just south of Michigan Avenue.

"It brings me a lot of comfort; it helps me realize he's around us. I feel it's encouragement from him to keep moving forward," she added.

The parade, sponsored by the United Irish Societies, kicks off at 2 p.m. The theme of this year's parade is the Detroit Irish: Proud of Home-land, Heritage and Heroes.

The parade travels north on Sixth Street, then west on Michigan Avenue to 14th Street. About 3,500 people in at least 72 entries are expected to participate in the event.

About 65,000 people watched the parade from the sidelines last year, according to parade officials. The parade will begin after about 10,000 people participated at noon in the annual Corktown Race 5K (3.1-mile) footrace that will take off from Michigan Central Station outside downtown.

"It's great to see how Detroit's Irish are rooted in the community," said Cynthia Canty, parade announcer and host of "Stateside with Cynthia Canty" on Michigan Radio (91.7 FM).

The parade may be the source of fun for thousands, but it also serves as the celebration of money raised by the 34 United Irish Societies, metro Detroit fraternal organizations that spend all year working on behalf of those in need, said parade Chairman Michael Kelly, president of the UIS.

"The day of the parade is to recognize those groups and celebrate our Irish heritage," he said Friday.

The Corktown Race raises money for the St. Patrick Senior Center and the Community Health and Social Service Center on Fort Street in southwestern Detroit near Corktown.