

St. Patrick's Parade a lifelong tradition for Livonia man

Written by Karen Smith Staff Writer
Mar. 11

hometownlife.com



Kelly

St. Patrick's Parade Fundraiser

Why: The United Irish Societies will present their annual St. Patrick's Parade Fundraiser. Guests will enjoy an authentic Irish buffet, music from The Codgers, Shamrock Shore, McSpillin, Inis-Ceol, Celtic Pipe Drum, Bill Grogans Goat, Terry Murphy Tommy O'Halloran Express, and a performance from Ardan School of Irish Dance FOUI Chowder Society. People will also have the opportunity to meet the 2013 grand marshal, Nora Cassidy, as well as the Maid of Erin and Her Court and the Queen and the Court of St. Brigid.

When: noon to 7 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 24

Where: Majestic Theatre, 4120 Woodward Ave., Detroit

How: Tickets are \$10 and available at the door or in advance at AOH Stephen Walsh, 24242 Grand River, Detroit; Colleen's Gaelic Gifts, 15373 Farmington Road, Livonia; or Gaelic League,

2068 Michigan Ave., Detroit.

From the time Michael Kelly of Livonia was the size of a leprechaun, he has been involved in the annual St. Patrick's Parade in Detroit.

His parents, Larry and Joann Kelly, would dress him in traditional Irish attire and push him in a stroller or pull him in a wagon.

He remembers how cold it usually was, but he also recalls his favorite parts as a kid: "Always the bands, seeing the kilts, Irish signs that they carried, pictures and stories of Ireland," he said.

Kelly is helping to create those memories for a whole new generation of children.

Kelly chairs the parade, and has for eight years.

At 2 p.m. Sunday, March 10, the president and owner of Environmental Maintenance Engineers in Inkster will wave his shillelagh (walking stick) in the air and say, "Let's have a parade."

And the 55-year annual tradition will continue.

Kelly grew up on the northwest side of Detroit, where his Irish father, whose roots go back to County Mayo in west Ireland, and German mother were very active in the Irish community.

Kelly said it was an easy sell for his father to get his mother involved in the Irish community.

“I think the fact Irish people are so friendly and welcoming, it's easy to embrace the Irish. They're a friendly culture,” he said.

Kelly grew up going to Irish clubs, playing cards, dancing, participating in fundraisers with other Irish children. And, every year but one — when he went to Florida during spring break while a student at Central Michigan University — he participated in the parade. “I missed it,” he said.

Kelly continues to stay involved — he is also president of the United Irish Societies, which supports, funds and runs the parade — because he likes how charitable the Irish community is.

“That's what we do,” he said of raising and donating money to deserving organizations.

One of the reasons for the parade is to raise awareness of the 34 groups that belongs to United Irish Societies and their contributions to the metro Detroit area. Examples include the Ancient Order of Hibernians, which hold an annual Souper Bowl to benefit the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, and the Fraternal Order of United Irishmen, which puts on the Corktown Races benefiting the St. Patrick's Senior Center and Community Health and Social Services Center, a primary care clinic that serves the medical needs of Detroit's southwest and eastside communities with an emphasis on the Hispanic and African-American populations.

The parade starts at Sixth Street and moves west on Michigan Avenue to 14th Street, about two hours later.

There are six divisions, and 10-15 groups in each division, including marching bands, pipe & drum bands, color guard units, floats, clowns, novelty groups and marching units. About 3,600 to 4,000 spectators watch, both Irish and non-Irish.

This year's theme is “Detroit Irish — Proud of Homeland, Heritage, & Heroes.”

West Bloomfield Police Officer Patrick O'Rourke, who was shot and killed Sept. 9, 2012, after responding to a domestic dispute, will be honored.

“That's an Irish hero,” Kelly said, adding O'Rourke's badge number, 55, corresponds with the number of years the parade has been going on. O'Rourke's widow and four children are expected to march in the parade.

The grand marshal will be Nora Cassidy of St. Clair Shores, whose deceased husband Seamus was a founding father of the parade.

Radio personality Cyndy Canty, formerly of WMGC-FM (105.1), will be master of ceremonies, taking over for Mary Galvin, who was master of ceremonies for 40 years.

The father of three young adults, Kelly said it's more difficult today to get kids involved in organizations that celebrate their heritage because they have so many more options for after-school activities.

But bringing children to the parade is one way to start, he said.

“There's so much tradition, that it helps make kids aware.”

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