

Sober St. Pat's Day Gains Momentum

BY MOLLY MULDOON

FOR the second year running, Sober St. Patrick's Day is expected to attract hundreds of people on Saturday, March 16 at Regis High School on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, right after the big St. Patrick's parade, for an event that organizers say is a new, alcohol-free way to celebrate the national Irish holiday.

The Sober St. Patrick's Day goal is simple — to reclaim the true spirit of the day and to change the perception that the Irish holiday is an excuse for binge drinking.

The brainchild of TV executive

William Spencer Reilly, the inaugural Sober St. Patrick's Day in New York enjoyed rave reviews last year. The event drew such favorable publicity that Belfast City has incorporated the idea into their upcoming St. Patrick's Day Festival, and intend to promote the brand over three days of events.

"The whole mission is to change the perception of what St. Patrick's Day can be, and not let it become something that's hijacked by binge drinking," Reilly told the *Irish Voice*.

"It's a party for people of all ages," Reilly promised.

The idea first came to Reilly on March 17 a few years ago when he was standing close to St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue during the famous parade.

"There were all these great Irish bands and fantastic music," Reilly recalled.

Out of the corner of his eye he spotted a young man with a beer in his hand wearing a t-shirt that said: "St. Patrick's Day today, hung-over tomorrow."

"Right then and there is when the light bulb went off," Reilly recalled.

"I realized there's so much more we can do with this day. We have been letting people use it as an excuse for binge drinking for too long."

Writer and actor Malachy McCourt told the *Irish Voice* that last year's sell out event exemplified Irish tradition.



As Fionnula Flanagan looks on, Bill Reilly presents the first annual Emerald Spirit Award to NACoA President and CEO Sis Wenger at last year's event.

"People felt very much at ease, which is the essence of Irishness — easy hospitality," McCourt said.

"It's already a tradition. Now they're doing it in Belfast!" McCourt added,

McCourt, who is an honorary committee member for the event, said the focus on alcohol on St. Patrick's Day in Manhattan is off-putting.

"The spectacle of young people puking all over the place is not a very nice thing for people to see," McCourt told the *Irish Voice*.

He encouraged people of all ages to join the Sober St. Patrick's Day celebrations which guarantee a great time for all ages.

"I think it will be a very joyful occasion," McCourt added.

Based on the interest of last year's Sober St. Patrick's Day, Reilly is hopeful events like this can be adopted around the U.S.

"We know we're onto something here because the way people have reacted so warmly to us," he says.

Reilly has created a crowd funding campaign online which has already raised almost \$4,000.

"We want to raise \$50,000 so we can do this sort of work year round, and move our event in New York to a bigger venue," he said.

"I had a gut feeling that this was an idea whose time had come."

The event on March 16 kicks off at 3 p.m. and includes a host of internationally acclaimed artists, including All-Ireland champion button accordion player John Whelan, All-Ireland champion fiddle player Brian Conway, 10-year-old Irish fiddle champion Haley Richardson and Irish author and actor McCourt.

Also scheduled to appear are Brendan Dolan, Tara O'Grady, Marie Reilly, Fiona Conway, the Niall O'Leary School of Irish Dance plus special surprise celebrity guests and political leaders.

The party will take place at Regis High School, 60 East 85th Street, New York. Tickets are \$12 per person, which includes light refreshments. For information and tickets visit www.soberstpatricksdays.org. Log onto <http://www.gofundme.com/soberstpatricksdays> to donate to the project.



Bill Reilly

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Bill Reilly introduces Ireland Consul General Noel Kilkenny at the first annual Sober St. Patrick's Day event.



Ireland Consul General Noel Kilkenny, Billy Reilly and Joan Burton, Irish Minister for Social Protection.