

GOOD THINGS COME IN MODERATION

Bill Reilly's unique Sober St Patrick's Day event is entering its third year and continues to grow apace. **John Riordan** spoke to the man who said enough is enough

There's always a stark contrast between the orderly marching up Fifth Avenue on St Patrick's Day and some of the messy scenes on the sidewalk.

Almost three years ago, Bill Reilly caught a glimpse of a young drunk male, not far from the cathedral and not long after noon.

He spied the t-shirt with the colorful lettering: "St Patrick's Day today - hungover tomorrow".

A year later in 2012, the inaugural Sober St Patrick's Day was a roaring success and the former television executive and special events producer had suddenly unearthed a solid alternative to the alcohol-fueled excesses which so often hijack the day.

"I got involved in this whole thing because I almost lost a family member to addiction," Reilly told *The Irish World*.

"That changed my life nine years ago. I had no idea about the ramifications. Most people don't.

If there is an alcoholic or a drug addict in the family, the way that really creates havoc in the entire family environment.

"Fortunately for us, that person is clean and sober for nine years but it really changed my whole frame of reference.

"What is really important, I must say and I always say is that we're not against people having a drink as long as they're not driving and they're the legal age.

"We're just against people using the day as an excuse to get wasted and make us look stupid."

After its sold-out success in 2012 and 2013, this alcohol-free celebration featuring world class musicians and dancers has moved to a bigger Manhattan venue - Cathedral High School at 350 East 56th Street

The event is also expanded to three more American cities - Cleveland, OH, Richmond, VA and Casper, WY - while also crossing the Atlantic to Belfast in Northern Ireland.

Prior to working in television, Reilly had an extensive career in Broadway theater and in producing major special events in New York such as the "TONY" Awards. It comes as no surprise then that this event is well organized and very well promoted.

"We're in great shape," he said.

"We have a really strong lineup. Special events are both an art and a science - you open and close in one night and you get no previews! You really need to

exceed people's expectations.

"We have a great team of people in all the different areas.

"I'm particularly excited about the new space which is bigger than where we were the first two years.

"We sold out those two events in advance so we obviously needed a bigger space but it's also going to give us more room in the main venue.

And we have an additional second venue downstairs which will be the children's venue, that's new this year."

This year's diverse lineup includes the UCD Choral Scholars (Dublin), the Tulla Pipe Band (Co Clare) and Cathy Maguire (Dundalk) while there will be a lot more dancing this year thanks to the All-Star Céilí Band, John Whelan (eight-time All-Ireland champion button accordion player); Brian Conway (five-time All-Ireland champion fiddle player), Brendan Dolan, Brendan Fahey and Ivan Goff.

The New Children's Program, which will be held downstairs, will feature Marianne McShane (storyteller), Haley Richardson (11 year-old All-Ireland Fiddle Champion), The Fee Sisters (musicians & dancers) and Donie Carroll (singer).

Reilly's fascinating ancestry is as much a part of the fabric of Manhattan as the parade itself.

His great grandfather was an immigrant stone cutter who built up a successful business whose handiwork defines some of the most austere buildings on Fifth Avenue such as the Met and the Astor Mansions, not far from where he encountered one of many boisterous revelers in 2011.

"I just went over to him," Reilly recalls. "I didn't pass judgement or anything - I just asked him where he got the t-shirt.

"He said he got it in his local mall in New Jersey and that they sell a million of them and isn't it cool?

"A light bulb went off and



Ireland Consul General Noel Kilkenny (left) and Sober St. Patrick's Day founder William Spencer Reilly at the 2013 event in New York City.



Pictured at the 2013 Sober St. Patrick's Day event at Regis High School in New York City: Sis Wenger, President and CEO of NACoA, Emerald Spirit Award honoree Jerry Moe, Vice President and National Director of the Betty Ford Center, Children Programs and William Spencer Reilly, founder of Sober St. Patrick's Day

that's how this whole thing got started. And that was right along the route where my great grandfather build all these buildings."

With the 2013 parade brought forward to Saturday March 16, Reilly had the opportunity to celebrate the holiday back in Ireland and after last year's show, flew straight to Belfast for their inaugural sober event.

"I was blown away when I arrived there on the Sunday morning. I was surprised they had all these floats - obviously not as big as the parade in Dublin but it was great to see what then happened.

"They incorporated Sober St Patrick's Day into their festival and they had an outdoor concert for 5,000 people. They're doing it again this year."

The hope now is to expand the initiative to Dublin and Philadelphia in 2015.

"I have high hopes," he admitted. "Joan Burton came to our party in 2012 thanks to Noel Kilkenny our Consul-General and she was just blown away by the whole thing.

"She said she'd like to see it come back across to Ireland. '2015 Philadelphia here we come' is the rallying cry but Dublin would be great as well. That's my hope."



William Spencer Reilly (center) poses with the John Whelan Band and 10-year-old All-Ireland fiddle champion Haley Richardson.