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## Ditch the drink and find some pride

William Spencer Reilly wants to break the association between Irishness and drunkenness, an image he thinks we're ashamed of

by Cian Traynor

William Spencer Reilly can pinpoint the moment he couldn't tolerate the "drunken Irish" image anymore. A little after noon on St. Patrick's Day 2010, as a stream of emerald-clad floats and marching bands paraded down New York's Fifth Avenue, something in the shadows of St. Patrick's Cathedral distracted him. A 22-year-old was knocking back a can of Budweiser and wearing a T-shirt that read: "Irish today, hung-over tomorrow." Reilly approached the young man, casually sparking a conversation, only to discover that the Irish drinking T-shirts are a booming business.

"A light bulb went on: I knew no other nationality would put up with that crap," he says. "Whether Irish or Irish American, I don't think we've stood up enough as a people to combat this. Quite frankly, I think it's an unattractive part of us. Perhaps it's because we're so interested in being liked that we kind of go along with it. We're willing to chuckle but, in our hearts, we're embarrassed."

Reilly is an award-winning television and theatre producer from Manhattan. His credits include *Patrick*, a 2004 film about Ireland's patron saint narrated by Liam Neeson and starring Gabriel Byrne – you don't have to spend long in Reilly's company to see that he takes his heritage seriously. Reclining on the leather couch of an associate's office in Dublin, the 62-year-old is hoping his idea to tackle the Irish reputation for excessive drinking can take off at home.

Back in January, Reilly began devising a way of celebrating Irish culture without getting plastered. The first step was to reclaim St. Patrick's Day. Although there was no intention to dampen anyone's party, he knew that if he could pull off an alcohol-free alternative in New York, the home of the largest and oldest St Patrick's Day parade in the world, it would be guaranteed to draw attention.

Immediately, he sensed two potential audiences: families with young children, and those affected by alcoholism. Beyond that, he was unsure of how the idea would be received, fearing that his fledgling concept of a Sober St. Patrick's Day would seem like an oxymoron. Reilly's own marketing people felt he was taking a risk: sticking his neck out could provoke controversy, derision, even indifference.

Once enough funding had been raised, largely through the help of charities, Reilly had just seven weeks to make it happen. "There was no venue, no tickets, no musicians. I had nothing but an idea...and a lot of people thought I was crazy."

Then something happened to convince Reilly that the timing was opportune. In the weeks leading up to March 17<sup>th</sup>, US Congressman Joseph Crowley led a public outcry over T-shirts, hats and accessories with slogans such as "Irish I Were Drunk" and "Irish Yoga" (depicting someone vomiting on their hands and knees) stocked by retail chains Urban Outfitters and Old Navy.

As word of Sober St. Patrick's Day circulated, acts offered to perform, people began to ask if it could come to their city, and the event soon sold out.

Eager to illustrate the craic that transpired, Reilly hops off the couch, grabs a laptop and coots up with a video-clip highlighting the comedy, step-dancing, music by All-Ireland Fleadh champions and the news coverage it all triggered. One of the special guests was writer and actor Malachy McCourt who, as Reilly points out, used to appear on *The Tonight Show* playing the character of the Irish buffoon. Now he is championing Sober St. Patrick's Day as the occasions' greatest addition since parades began.

"I think we hit the zeitgeist of people saying. 'Wait a second. This has gone too far' Sober St. Patrick's Day is perhaps a manifestation of that and an opportunity to re-define who we are as a people, to combat that stereotype."

### **The Irish Angle**

Now Reilly's attention is turning to Ireland, where he hopes a similar shift in perception can be harnessed. While last month's cross-Border survey, Alcohol Consumption and Alcohol Related Harm in Ireland, helped highlight Irish drinking habits, Reilly was disappointed to see Roisin Shortall resign as minister of state for health, and he hopes the drive to challenge drinking attitudes will continue.

In the meantime, Reilly has met with support groups in Dublin, convened with members of Belfast City Council, and says he's pushing for appointments with Shortall's replacement, Alex White, as well as Minister for Social Protection Joan Burton, who attended the inaugural event in New York. The short-term goal is to double the size of Sober St. Patrick's Day in New York, launch it here and find corporate sponsorship to help the concept grow.

But there is another motivation behind Reilly's campaign. Seven years ago, he almost lost a family member to addiction. "In the process of that catastrophic situation, I began to learn about the much larger issue of how alcohol affects not just the alcoholic but the whole family, how dysfunction kicks in and creates lifelong problems unless they're properly addressed."

Although Reilly speaks with the persuasive focus of a producer, often chewing thoughtfully on the ends of his glasses, he grows animated and outspoken on the subject of recovery. He has nothing against drink companies, he says, but is adamant that for some people the slogan "drink responsibly" does not apply.

"The root of why I did this is because of the great misinformation and ignorance of this drug," he says. "I'm not a clinician. I'm not trained in this. I just happen to be, like countless others on the street, someone whose family has been affected and who wants to do something about it. I'm passionate because it's a much bigger problem than people admit or realize. But since it's part of the culture and we all use it, what we do is rationalize to the point where if people aren't crawling around in some gutter, then it's considered okay.

"We live in a society where it's put up with, where we allow it to go on because it's legal and people want to believe it's different – but it's not different at all"

For now, Reilly recognizes that sobering up the Irish reputation will require long-term effort. The reaction to his campaign so far, however, suggests he is not alone. "There are a lot of Irish or Irish-Americans who have drinking problems, but so do other nationalities. Rather than just propagate the stereotype, I think there's a new awareness that we can finally do something about it."



*William Spencer Reilly came up with Sober St. Patrick's Day, and now he wants to bring it home to Ireland.*

See [www.soberstpatricksday.org](http://www.soberstpatricksday.org)