

In Focus



William Spencer Reilly

Founder / Producer,
Sober St. Patrick's Day®

New Yorker William Spencer Reilly is a television executive and special events producer. In his most recent position as EVP at Odyssey Networks and President & CEO of Lightworks Pictures, Bill Reilly won over 30 national television awards for his work as Executive Producer on Hallmark Channel Movies of the Week, several series, docudramas (among them, the Emmy nominated film, "Patrick", on the life of Ireland's patron saint, featuring Gabriel Byrne and Liam Neeson), and other drama specials for the BBC such as "Florence Nightengale" and "C.S. Lewis."

Prior to working in television, he had an extensive career in the Broadway theatre and in producing major Special Events in New York, running day to day operations of The American Theatre Wing, founders of the Antoinette Perry "Tony" Awards.

As Executive Director of Fordham University's Sesquicentennial Celebration, he produced 88 events for the university's year long celebration, including Waitin' In The Wings®: The Night The Understudies Take Center Stage" one of the most highly acclaimed events in Fordham's 150 year history.

In recognition of his work creating Sober St. Patrick's Day® Reilly was presented with the Caron Community Special Recognition Award in June 2012.

What inspired you to create Sober St. Patrick's Day?

I was standing outside of St. Patrick's Cathedral on St. Patrick's Day, 2011, as the parade was passing by - feeling great and very proud of my Irish heritage. It was about 12:30 in the afternoon and it was a glorious sight. Marching bands all in step, no one does it better.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a young man, about 22, holding a can of beer and obviously drunk. He and several of his friends, all of whom were almost as smashed as he was, were also drinking in public.

The young man was wearing a t-shirt that said, "St. Patrick's Day Today, Hungover Tomorrow." Without passing judgement, I asked him where he'd gotten the shirt and he said, "In my local mall in New Jersey; they sell a million of 'em! Isn't it cool?" Right then and there, a light bulb went off.

Why do you think it's important to have a non-alcoholic event?

To show that people, particularly young people, don't have to be wasted to have fun. And, as per our mission statement, "to reclaim the true spirit of the day."

There's also a huge audience of people in recov-

ery - and their families - who need and want an alternative way to celebrate St. Patrick's Day. So many of them and thousands of other so-called "regular folks" have simply abandoned the day.

Are you against people having a few drinks to celebrate St. Patrick's Day?

As we say on our website (www.SoberStPatricksDay.org), as long as you're of age and not in recovery, we're not against people having a drink or two on St. Patrick's Day; we're simply against binge drinking on St. Patrick's Day. We don't want some people to use St. Patrick's Day as an excuse to get wasted and making us all look bad.

The expression "a few drinks" is curious, because for some people, that expression can easily mean seven or eight. Simply put, we're not at all anti-drink, we're anti-getting drunk. This day should be about making us look good, not fostering an unfair stereotype. We have so much to be proud of, and our kids need to know and see that.

What is your favorite Irish song? Favorite Irish movie?

Song: "Will You Go, Lassie, Go" - particularly the way Cathy Maguire sings it. My favorite Irish movie is "Waking Ned Devine."

Who is the target audience for Sober St. Patrick's Day?

Families and kids, anyone looking for a safe, fun party, Irish music fans who want to enjoy some great entertainment, people in recovery - pretty much anyone sick and tired of the day being hijacked by insanity. It's a huge tent, and everyone is welcome. Going by the diverse audiences who have attended our last two sold-out events, we appeal to a broad range of people. So basically, our target audience is anybody not looking to get wasted.

What kind of reaction have you gotten to the event?

It's been beyond my wildest expectations. We sold out in advance in 2012 and 2013, and are moving to a bigger venue this year in New York City. We'll be in five cities this year, including Northern Ireland. The press coverage has been through the roof, and I truly believe we're at a tipping point now.

Belfast had 5,000 people last year, and the Belfast City Council is again incorporating it into their St. Patrick's Day Festival this year. We just learned that Philly has signed up for next year, and have begun preliminary plans already!

What is your Irish background?

In the 1870s, my great-grandfather, John Cullen, on my father's side, was kicked out of the house for becoming a Catholic at sixteen. There's an amazing story there, but that's for another time. My people are from both the north and the south, so I'm a mix of green and orange, and very proud of that combo. My mom's people are the Rior-dans, and we Reillys go way back.

Every Irish person has a party piece. What's yours?

I love to tell a good yarn. I also love singing around a piano with a big group. I used to hang with some great folks from the Broadway theatre - and fortunately, I married one! She's still a stunner. But it's something we don't do enough of any more; feels like a dying art.

Tell us a bit about your sponsors.

We owe a huge debt of thanks to the major players in the recovery community, as well as to Irish Consul General Noel Kilkenny. They were responsible for making this happen initially, and for bringing this very interesting mix of people together on St. Patrick's Day. The recovery organizations' logos are on our website and I am happy to say that they are back again this year.

Last year, other Irish organizations such as the American Ireland Fund came on board as the community realized we weren't interested in raining on anybody's parade. Word spread about our success the year before, and the press and TV had been so

positive about this. Also last year, The O'Sullivan Children Foundation made all the difference, as did Pepsi which came on board - and is very happily back again this year.

Pepsi is a huge sponsor for us, and we believe their involvement is now the start of other, blue chip companies getting in on the act. We need help, however, in getting through those proper doors, so I welcome any help in doing that.

Although not an official sponsor, Noel Kilkenny, the Irish Consul General, has been our most supportive fan, and has helped break down any walls of suspicion about us. I owe him everything for helping us pave the way. I am grateful to Maura Kelly, who introduced me to Noel a little over two years ago. People now know we're here to stay.

How does your experience in the broadcast entertainment industry help you put together the entertainment lineup?

Before being a television producer, I worked in the Broadway theatre for the first half of my career and ran the day-to-day operations of the American Theatre Wing, founders of the TONY Awards, and later was founding Executive Director of The TriBeCa Performing Arts Center.

Before that I was an actor, but I cut my teeth on doing special events - that's where you open and close in one night, and get no previews! Live theatre is like nothing else, but special events are both an art and a science. Producing television's almost a cake walk after that.

How did the other cities get involved?

Word of mouth spread - that simple. Our website explains how to do it in other cities. It's fairly easy if you believe in its importance and follow the guidelines - although using the name "Sober St. Patrick's Day®" requires permission.

What's the best thing about organizing Sober St. Patrick's Day?

Working with so many talented and committed people is a privilege and a joy.

What's the most surprising thing you learned after hosting this event for the past two years?

The most surprising thing is after hearing so many kudos, getting such amazing media coverage, and hearing over and over again that it's an idea whose time has come.

How do you plan to take Sober St. Patrick's Day® into the future?

I am searching for a chairperson with a great rolodex. We need someone who will help us take this idea to many other cities, build on what we've accomplished and help create a real organization. I've been doing this for almost three years now by the seat of my pants. It doesn't get any easier when it comes to raising money for this new movement. Are there any more blue chip companies like Pepsi out there?



The message of Sober St. Patrick's Day resonates with young and old.