

OUR VIEW

Irish group has served city well

The Newport Irish Heritage Association announced earlier this year that it was downsizing significantly, and no longer would be involved with Newport Irish Heritage Month, instead choosing to focus on an annual dinner and presentation of the Fenian and Civitas awards and a college scholarship.

But this was not seen as a bad thing by organizers.

“Our mission has been accomplished,” Rick O’Neill, one of the association’s founding members, told The Daily News in January.

The organization came about in the late 1970s in an effort to raise awareness about Irish culture and history in Newport, beyond the annual St. Patrick’s Day Parade. By promoting a variety of cultural, historical, musical and educational programs each March for the past several decades, it did just that. And its legacy lives on, as the celebration of the 35th annual Newport Irish Heritage Month kicked off over the weekend with a “Bus Tour of Irish Newport” and “Dancing at the Forty Steps,” among other events and activities.

Informal dances at the Forty Steps off Cliff Walk among the Irish, many of whom worked at the estates on Bellevue Avenue, provided a way to get together and blow off a little steam throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, said Vincent Arnold, president of the **Museum of Newport Irish History** and guide for Saturday’s bus tour, which also made stops at the Barney Street Cemetery and Fort Adams.

“Obviously, things that happened in the past build and build and build to what’s going on in the present,” Arnold said. “It’s difficult to understand what’s going on today if you don’t know what led up to it.”

To help inform residents and visitors about the contributions the Irish made — and continue to make — to the City-by-the-Sea, the **Museum of Newport Irish History** at 648 Thames St. will be open on Saturday, March 17, from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. and Saturdays, March 24 and March 31, from 1-4 p.m. Admission is free for museum members and by donation for nonmembers.

The permanent site for the museum’s Interpretive Center on lower Thames Street is one of the reasons the members of the Newport Irish Heritage Association felt they could take a step back.

The Ancient Order of Hibernians Dennis E. Collins Division No. 1 in Newport, with support from Peter F. Martin, a state representative from Newport, also is helping to keep Irish Heritage Month alive, by serving as the clearinghouse for Irish-themed events during the month of March. A calendar of events is available at its website, www.aohnewport.org.

And as part of Newport’s sister-city relationship with Kinsale, Ireland, the 11th Kinsale Festival of Fine Food will take place this Thursday through Saturday, when Irish chefs will pair up with local restaurants to serve signature dishes.

“So many others are promoting Irish heritage, the association is no longer needed,” O’Neill said. “It’s a passing of the baton.”

We salute O’Neill and fellow association founders Rick Kelly, Jim Mahoney and the late Paul W. Crowley for their years of dedication to making sure Irish history became such an integral part of the fabric of the Newport community, and we applaud the organizations and volunteers who continue to carry that baton.