

Winters to March with Grand Marshals

By Philip Cozzolino

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced the cancellation of the past two St. Patrick's Day parades, many understood the decision, but still felt the disappointment of not being able to march the traditional route from City Hall to St. Augustin's Church.

One of those feeling let down was Jimmy Winters, a longtime staple of the local community who was selected to lead last year's parade as grand marshal.

"It was an honor and a surprise to be chosen last year," he said. "It was unbelievable, honestly. I got all of my green clothes together; a green suit and a green suede jacket. I just didn't get to wear them."

Robert "Rocky" Kempenaar II will serve as grand marshal when the parade returns on March 12. In recognition of the missed opportunity due to the pandemic, Winters and 2020 grand marshals, Brent Ryan and Derek Luke, will march behind Kempenaar as part of this year's ceremonies.

"Again, it's an honor to be included in any way," said Winters. "It should be a great feeling ... everybody coming together for one common cause, the parade. It's an important part of the fabric of the community."

Winters, originally from Baltimore, is a former member of the Newport Police Department, where he served for eight years first as a communications and safety dispatcher, and then as a police officer for 26 years before his retirement. In his role, Winters was a community-oriented member of the department. His familiarity with the social services offered locally coupled with his own educational background, having received a bachelor's degree in social work from Morgan State College in Baltimore in 1965, made him a dedicated member of the force.

Winters and his wife, Barbara, founded the Newport Housing Hotline in 1978. Among the first of its kind in the country, and with funding from the city, the nonprofit helps the homeless find shelter, connect with other organizations and get assistance.

Throughout their lives, the

couple have been involved in many community initiatives to help those in need, with housing issues being their primary focus. Since its founding, the Housing Hotline has received over 100,000 calls for help.

"The City of Newport took a chance on the Housing Hotline over 40 years ago," he said. "Nobody had a hotline back then. It's nice to give back to the city in this way, to pay that forward. You make a lot of partnerships over four decades. Like the parade, everybody at Housing Hotline and our community partners come together to work toward a common goal."

This year, Winters plans to march and continue the festivities after them.



Jimmy Winters will be decked out in his green suit for parade festivities. (Photo by Lynne Tungett)

the parade. An accomplished musician and singer, he plans to play music in Aquidneck Park following the event. There will also be a testimonial dedicated to Winters at this year's Grand Marshal Roast at St. Augustin's Church in the days leading up to the celebration.

Winters thanked Kempenaar, Ryan and St. Patrick's Day Parade Committee member Dennis Sullivan for being flexible with the parade's organization this year.

"It's wonderful to be a part of this community," he said. "There's so much spirit and warmth and friendship."

As for leading the parade in the future, he is not ruling anything out, though he's happy just to get back in the swing of things.

"I'll come back if they want me to," he said. "It's just nice to be a part of it in any way again."

Irish Heritage Celebrated Throughout the City

By Philip Cozzolino

With music, dancing, lectures, tours, its famous parade and more, Newport will be celebrating its 45th annual Irish Heritage Month throughout March. Many local organizations and businesses will participate in the month-long festivities, which spotlight the city's rich history of Irish culture and influence.

Though Newport is known for its annual St. Patrick's Day Parade, which will be held March 12, there are a variety of events throughout the month that will promote local Irish heritage, culture and history. One organization sponsoring many historic offerings and learning opportunities is the Museum of Newport Irish History.

Located at 648 Thames St., the museum will offer visitors a deep dive into Irish immigration to the city from the 1600s through the present at its interpretive center on three weekends in March. Through various exhibits, including photographs, video and artifacts, visitors will learn about the lifestyle and history of immigrants who made Newport their home.

"[The center will highlight] the contributions to the community by individuals of Irish descent, and our volunteer docent staff ... looks forward to greeting visitors and answering any questions they may have," said the museum's board president, Deanna Conheeny.

The interpretive center will be open March 4-6, March 11-13 and March 18-20, from noon to 4 p.m. Admission is by donation. Museum members and children under 16 are free.

The public can also learn about the historic St. Joseph Cemetery, known locally as the Barney Street Cemetery, the oldest Catholic cemetery in Rhode Island.

"This cemetery site is central to the history of the early Irish in Newport, as it is the location of Newport's and Rhode Island's first Roman Catholic church, consecrated in 1828," said Conheeny. "Up until that time, traveling priests visited the area periodically to minister to the faithful."

"The number of Catholics in Newport expanded rapidly with immigration from Ireland, including many Irish who came to help build Fort Adams," she said. "The bishop decided a permanent mission in Newport was needed."

A number of the burial grounds' graves are marked with the Irish city or town the deceased originated from and tell a tale of unimaginable hardship.



Dancing at the Forty Steps will be on March 27.

"Many of those buried there died at what we would consider a young age, including young children," Conheeny said. "It's very poignant to see."

Outdoor tours of the cemetery will be given by a museum historian or guide on March 6, March 20 and March 27, weather permitting.

Newport's first mayor of Irish descent, Patrick Boyle, who led the city in the early 20th century, will also be remembered in a one-hour lecture sponsored by the museum on March 23, at 6 p.m., taking place online and live at The Wayfinder Hotel. It will be presented by guest speaker Steve Marino, who summarized Boyle's life as one of impact.

"How did the son of Irish Catholic immigrants, a Democrat in a solidly Republican town, manage to enjoy a political life that spanned 20 years and one that saw him elected by the citizens of Newport 17 times?" Marino asked. "While little is known today, we have to keep in mind that when this man died in office in 1923, it made the newspapers in Boston, Providence and New York. Given the impact Boyle made in Newport and beyond over the course of 20 years during the Gilded Age, it's amazing that he has fallen into obscurity."

A reception will follow the event. A fee for in-person participation will be applied at the door. The event is free to attend via Zoom.

Finally, March wraps up in a manner fitting of the celebratory month's spirit with singing and dancing at Cliff Walk's Forty Steps on March 27, at 3 p.m. As the official closing event of Irish Heritage Month, the afternoon will commemorate the informal Irish dances held at the location in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and will feature live traditional Irish music and demonstrations of Irish set dancing and singing. The event is free and open to the public, weather permitting.

"Many of the city's Irish who worked in Newport would meet here during the warm weather months to socialize and dance, accompanied by the accordion, banjo and other instruments," Conheeny said.

"Newspaper accounts of these Gilded Age seaside gatherings mention waltzes and polkas among the dances enjoyed. Press accounts also paint an appealing picture of a very democratic type of gathering, with folks from all walks of life joining in the fun, including visitors to Newport who happened by the scene as they strolled Cliff Walk to take in the sea air."

Many more events are scheduled to take place in Newport throughout the month. For reservations or further info, a full schedule, visit newportirishhistory.org or call 401-841-5493.



Irish History Interpretive Center
Learn about Irish immigration to the Newport area and of the contributions to the community by individuals of Irish descent from the 1600s to the present, 12-4 p.m., Fri-Sun, 648 Thames St., newportirishhistory.org.

SATURDAY, MARCH 5
Trolley Tour of Irish Newport
Two-hour tours include stops at Forty Steps and Barney Street Cemetery, departs from Hibernian Hall, 10 a.m. and 12:30 p.m., donations accepted, reservations required, call 401-965-7276 or visit newportirishhistory.org.

Fort Adams Tours
Three one-hour guided tours of the historic Newport fort constructed with Irish labor between 1824 and 1857, 11 a.m., 1 p.m., and 3 p.m., weather permitting, \$15 for adults, \$8 for children 6-17, children 5-and-under free, mention Irish Heritage Month for a \$3 discount, fortadams.org.

Grand Marshal Roast
Roast for Rocky Kempenaar II and a testimonial to Jimmy Winters, hors d'oeuvres, music by Rhode to Dublin, 5:30 p.m., \$25, St. Augustin's Church Hall.

SUNDAY, MARCH 6
Fort Adams Tours
11 a.m., 1 p.m., and 3 p.m., See March 4.

Irish Cemetery Tour
Guided tour of historic Saint Joseph Cemetery, locally known as Barney Street Cemetery, 12:30 p.m., also March 20 and 27, Barney and Mt. Vernon Streets, call Ann at 401-841-5493 or visit newportirishhistory.org for more info or to reserve.

Traditional Irish Music Sessions
Live traditional Irish music hosted by A.O. Gutierrez, Tim May and Jack Wright, family-friendly, arrive early if you'd like a table, 6-9 p.m., The Fastnet Pub, One Broadway, thefastnetpub.com

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