

# Parade People: Catholics stoke Baltimore's St. Patrick tradition

Joanna Miskelly Cox found true love at Baltimore's St. Patrick Parade.

Linda McHale Poggi began Irish dancing as a little girl and missed the parade once since, in 2007 – two days after giving premature birth to her twins, Nicholas and Olivia.

After five years portraying the event's patron, Chris Oswald has an equally good excuse for missing this year, as he'll be in Houston for the wedding of a niece. He's passing his staff to George Stegmaier, who's marched in the parade with one fraternal organization or another since the 1970s.

While the Mummers from Philadelphia and Irish Wolfhounds and their owners from throughout the Mid-Atlantic might grace the parade, it is buoyed by local Catholic individuals and organizations who are accustomed to giving.

Stegmaier attended Catholic schools for 16 years, from St. Charles Borromeo School in Pikesville to Loyola College – which he calls by his former name, being 73 himself. He's financial secretary of Baltimore City's Division 5 of the Ancient Order of the Hibernians (AOH), the nation's oldest Irish Catholic fraternal organization, whose motto is "Friendship, Unity, and Christian Charity."

Among other causes, his division raises funds for St. Elizabeth School, which provides special education; the Center for Pregnancy Concerns; the Maryland Special Olympics; and the Irish Railroad Workers Museum.

Stegmaier, who regularly worships at the chapel at University of Maryland St. Joseph Medical Center in Towson, has played Santa Claus for assorted groups for "about 30 years." Oswald, his predecessor as St. Patrick, has also had that role at his parish, St. Pius X in Rodgers Forge.

The mascot of the University of Notre Dame is the Fighting Irish, a play on stereotypes, but this year's parade patron portrayal handover is among friendly

rivals, as Stegmaier went to what is now Loyola Blakefield, and Oswald was in the class of 1979 at Calvert Hall College High School.

“All the kids who line the (St. Patrick) parade route look at you as the Irish Santa Claus,” said Oswald, equally thrilled to exchange waves with Archbishop William E. Lori, who often watches the parade from the stoop of his residence as it winds down Charles Street from the Washington Monument to the Inner Harbor.

Oswald has coached CYO basketball at St. Pius X, and been president of the Fathers Club both at his parish and at the Institute of Notre Dame. That’s the alma mater of his wife, Jeanne, a member of the Ladies AOH.

Prior to taking the part of St. Patrick, Oswald watched their daughter, Kelly, high-step with the Egan School of Irish Dance, based at their home parish.

It’s run by Becky Egan Hogg, a parishioner of St. Matthew in Northwood and the director of mission and ministry at Mercy High School. She’s a Mercy alumna, as is McHale Poggi, who runs the McHale School of Irish Dance. Its 45 girls and four boys practice every Thursday night at the Knights of Columbus Father O’Neill Council 4011 in Lutherville - where Stegmaier happens to be a member.

“We’re based on love of Irish culture,” said McHale Poggi, who grew up in St. Michael Parish in Overlea, but now worships at St. Joseph in Cockeysville, which was built by Irish immigrants in 1852. “Walking through the cemetery, it’s amazing to see the history there.”

Her mother, Mary, was born in County Mayo and made her first costumes. McHale Poggi recycles shoes for those in her troupe, who, come parade day, only require “a water bottle and a smile.”

Like their elders, her dancers practice philanthropy, collecting food donations for Viva House in southwest Baltimore.

Among the many parade regulars are the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick and the Hibernian Society of Baltimore, which was founded in 1803 to care for indigent newcomers. Dorsey Baldwin has marched with both. The 2019 Hibernian of the Year, he’s a parishioner of Immaculate Conception in Towson.

After serving as chairwoman of the last three parades, Miskelly Cox will be the grand marshal for the 64th annual, which is set for March 10.

A parishioner of St. Ignatius in Baltimore, Miskelly Cox is a member of the Ladies AOH Division 14 in Baltimore County. She went to the Institute of Notre Dame when it included grades 1-8, and then Mount St. Agnes College and the College of Notre Dame of Maryland.

She remembers when the parade route included Cathedral Street and a pass in front of the Basilica. She knows for certain that the 1974 parade was held March 17, the feast day itself, because that was the occasion when she met her husband, David.

"Our vacations are based around the parade," Miskelly Cox said. "I wouldn't dare go away this time of year, because I might miss a fundraiser.

"I love being around the Washington Monument before the start. The excitement in the air, the bagpipes, the kids lining up. It brings the city together. It's a family day."

*Email Paul McMullen at [pmcmullen@CatholicReview.org](mailto:pmcmullen@CatholicReview.org)*