

Grand Marshal Monte: He's Just The One Walking

By Kitty Merrill The Independent 3-19-2014



How's Grand Marshal Paul Monte getting ready to lead Sunday's Friends of Erin Parade? "I've been practicing walking. I've been practicing drinking. And I've been practicing walking while drinking," he said Sunday, with a sparkle in his (temporarily) Irish eyes. Asked to detail his duties beyond leading one of the state's largest parades through Montauk, he shrugged, "I don't know. It's a pretty easy job, I think. You just have to not fall down." He agreed the official Grand Marshal shillelagh might provide assistance in that area.

Kidding aside, Monte said he's "honored, thrilled, and excited" the Friends of Erin chose him to lead their 52nd annual parade next Sunday.

The general manager and CEO of Gurney's Inn received his official Friends of Erin green blazer and black bowler in anticipation of marching with the group in Monday's parade in the city. He tabbed that as one of the most exciting things he was anticipating this week.

Rather than highlight his own accomplishments - Monte's been the president of the Montauk Chamber of Commerce for a decade, sits on a slew of hotel association boards, and volunteers on the finance committee for his church St. Therese of Lisieux -- this year's Grand Marshal praised the Friends.

"They're so important, the Friends of Erin do so much," he said. Their parade, an annual touchstone signifying spring, and the summer season are on the way, is "crucial for the local community. It primes the pump, and after a long winter, it means so much financially, mentally . . . People come to town, stay in our hotels, eat in our restaurants, go to the stores. It wouldn't happen without the Friends of Erin."

For Friends prez Joe Bloecker, the Friends wouldn't happen without Monte. For years Gurney's has served as headquarters for the parade, providing the venue for such fundraisers as the grand marshal luncheon and parade eve cocktail party. "Paul's always been the guy in the background helping to make things happen. We couldn't do the things we do if it wasn't for the help the Montauk Friends of Erin get from Paul at Gurney's," Bloecker said.

"That's community, isn't it?" Monte mused. "We all work together, we all help each other."

"He's always motivated by what's best for Montauk, he's never in it for himself," Lorraine Creegan, executive director of the Montauk Chamber of Commerce observed. "His whole heart, mind and body are here in Montauk."

Speaking of body, Monte joked that he sought a few tips on how to build up his stamina and "be able to hit nine bars in one day" from longtime friend and colleague Carl Darenberg. A member of the chamber board, Darenberg plans to be among those who "toast and roast" Monte at the Grand Marshal's luncheon on Friday.

John Behan started the Grand Marshal's luncheon 25 years ago. He recalled coaching Monte's Little League team during the late 60s after he returned from Vietnam. He believes it's "perfect" that Monte follow in his uncle's footsteps. Nick Monte was both the Grand Marshal and The Keeper of the Inn, roles Paul now holds.

The Inn isn't just headquarters for parade festivities, it serves as the go to locale for an array of community and charitable functions every year. Gurney's hosts the Hamptons Film Festival, the Montauk Music Festival, the annual Girls Night Out breast cancer awareness event, just to name a few. It's also provided a venue for local shops to mount weekly fashion shows during the summer and promote their businesses. Confronted with the extensive list of ways his family's inn helped the community, Monte said simply, "Gurney's is Montauk and Montauk is Gurney's."

"I would say that Paul Monte is part of the fabric of Montauk, but in truth he's more like the thread that holds it all together," Suffolk County Legislator Jay Schneiderman, a Montauk native, opined. "Everyone loves Montauk and big part of the reason is Paul Monte."

For years Ingrid Lemme was Gurney's PR specialist. She said Monte "is one of the most humble men I ever met. He is gonna walk the line wondering how he got there."

Schneiderman agreed. "Paul often plays a behind the scenes role, making sure everything goes smoothly and everyone is happy," he said. "It's fitting he take center stage as Grand Marshal."

Bringing Sunday's interview to a conclusion, Monte gave evidence to Lemme's assessment. Being named Grand Marshal, he said, "It's really for my family, it's really for Gurney's. I'm just the one who's walking."

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