

May the Road Rise Up To Smack You

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Body

WOULDN'T it be nice to march up Fifth Avenue with the wind at our backs for a change? Imagine: a parade that celebrates one immigrant experience in a manner that brings pride to all -- with that wind nudging us onward, and not slapping our faces, as if to scold. Now wouldn't that be grand?

But some of the reports preceding the St. Patrick's Day parade today were fostering an urge to march in the opposite direction.

For here were the Fire Department and two unions, reminding firefighters to behave on St. Patrick's Day. Yes, many off-duty firefighters in uniform drink on March 17, and yes, there have been a few alcohol-related incidents of late. But should this city's firefighters be warned like sixth graders embarking on a class trip?

Here, too, was the New York City Correction Department Emerald Society, disinventing the correction commissioner from marching beside its members because he had demoted one of their brethren. Some muttered that the demotion smacked of discrimination against the Irish.

And here was the parade committee, barring an Irish vodka company from serving as a sponsor because of its minor involvement with that other parade in Woodside, Queens -- the "gay" one. The company's sin, apparently, was to sponsor a children's marching band in that unholy event. (By the way, since when do liquor companies sponsor children's events?)

James Barker, the parade committee's executive director, said that the official St. Patrick's Day parade honors a Roman Catholic saint and that after the company's involvement with that other parade, "We wouldn't touch them with a thousand-foot pole." He went on to explain that homosexuality is an illness that can be controlled.

Mother Machree.

Time to kick off a one-person parade, away from Fifth Avenue, away from Manhattan. Into the tunnel, under the East River and up again, resurfacing in Woodside, of all places. Down the avenue, past the pubs and up a flight of stairs known so well to people who are new to this country.

Here is the Emerald Isle Immigration Center, where immigrants unload the questions that weigh them down. How do I apply for citizenship? How do I sponsor my fiancée so that she can join me in this country? How do I get a Social Security card? Do you know of any jobs?

For a suggested donation, which often comes in crumpled fives and tens, many clients will lay bare their hopes and fears. Some will flip through the job book that is kept behind the receptionist's desk ("Waitress"; "Part-time nanny"; "Handyman/Doorman/Porter/Must Have Green Card"). And some may one day stand in front of the office's stark-white wall and smile for the Polaroid camera that snaps the headshots that accompany applications for citizenship.

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WHEN it was founded in 1988, the center adopted a slogan that was meant to evoke its mission: "Meeting the needs of the newest Irish arrivals." Now, 16 years later, that mission has broadened so dramatically that some at the center see a need for a new motto.

For one thing, explained Siobhan Dennehy, the executive director, many of the center's Irish clients are not new to the United States. For another, she said, many clients are not Irish at all. They just know it as place to turn to for help.

Monday was fairly typical. Gardenia Diaz, a counselor who is from Colombia, talked by telephone to more than a dozen clients -- natives of Ireland, but also of Peru, Argentina and Colombia. She also met with a woman from Ecuador who was preparing her application for citizenship.

Another counselor, John Stahl, juggled many telephone inquiries with several appointments. He met with a Venezuelan man interested in becoming a citizen and a woman from County Antrim who was curious about American citizenship.

As he chatted with the woman, a young couple walked in. "We're just after arriving in New York," the man said, his brogue answering the question, From where?

Next came a man from a small island -- not Ireland, but Dominica, in the West Indies -- wanting to know about applying for a green card, which would give him permanent legal status. He sat down under a wall decoration of shamrocks and began filling out a form.

Ms. Dennehy, a native of County Dublin, acknowledged that some Irish people -- though hardly a majority -- have told her that the center should focus on the needs of Irish immigrants only. "But that would be an impossibility," she said. "I couldn't imagine turning anybody away."

The parade to her doorstep will resume tomorrow. The center is closed today, in honor of St. Patrick.

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