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Make your St. Pat's big, old and green

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COLLEEN LARKIN

Larkin & Moran Brothers, featuring L to R: Sean Dennis, Kevin Moran, Dan Larkin, Joe Larkin, Mike Larkin, Dan Larkin Jr., Terry Moran and Neal Sullivan.

Chrissie Dickinson, Chicago Tribune

9:00 pm, March 4, 2015

There's a saying that everyone's Irish on St. Patrick's Day. For those who want to start the celebration early this year, Forever Green 40 brings the party to the Park West on Friday.

Hosted by the Young Irish Fellowship Club of Chicago (YIFC), the 21-and-older event is one of the

largest and longest-running St. Patrick's Day parties in the city. "We like to think of Forever Green as a kickoff to the St. Patrick's Day season, which is really a couple of weekslong celebration of the Irish heritage here in Chicago," says Connor Kelly, the Forever Green Chair.

The evening's entertainment lineup is packed with modern acts that are deeply rooted in Irish tradition. On tap will be the Celtic-rock band the Larkin & Moran Brothers, the marching bagpipes of the Shannon Rovers Irish Pipe Band and the internationally renowned Trinity Irish Dancers.

The not-for-profit Young Irish Fellowship Club is a volunteer-based social organization with more than 300 members. A subsidiary of the venerable Irish Fellowship Club of Chicago, the YIFC promotes Irish heritage and culture in the city and plans a variety of monthly events. All proceeds benefit two charities each year. This year's recipients are the Danny Did Foundation, which supports children with epilepsy, and the Ignite the Spirit Fund, which benefits members and families of the Chicago Fire Department.

Forever Green celebrates its 40th anniversary this year. It's the YIFC's major annual fundraiser. "Forever Green is our pride-and-joy event," says Kelly. "St. Patrick's Day is the highlight of our calendar."

It's a busy time of year for Irish-American artists in the city. "For us, St. Patrick's Day is the one time of year when the phone is ringing all the time," says Dan Larkin of the Larkin & Moran Brothers. "It's a party atmosphere. Spring is coming. It's a sign of brighter and better days. In the city of Chicago, where you have a strong Irish population, the tradition has been carried on. People enjoy St. Patrick's Day. I think it's similar to Cinco de Mayo. It's been fully adopted by all of Chicago and all of America."

The YIFC's Kelly agrees. "People like to celebrate their heritage," he says.

For four decades, Forever Green has played an increasingly significant role in that celebration. Starting as a group of friends celebrating St. Patrick's Day, the gathering began modestly in someone's basement, then moved to a garage, to a bar and later to Navy Pier. Several years ago the full-blown party moved to the Park West.

Larkin's band has played Forever Green a number of times in the past. "It's a feel-good event for us," he says. "The sound is great. The people are great. The organization is great. The money is donated to charities."

In the literal sense of the term, this is one green event. "Everyone is dressed for the occasion," observes Larkin.

The evening's program kicks off with a bang — or rather, the thrilling drone and clarion call of the Shannon Rovers. Kelly observes that the sound of bagpipes is a proven showstopper that rivets the crowd's attention.

"The Shannon Rovers march in through the front doors, down the middle of the Park West to the front of the stage on the dance floor," he says. "They make their way through the crowd and the sea parts."

The award-winning Trinity Irish Dancers will also be on hand. "It'll be about a 15-minute exhibition of some of the best Irish dancing that hopefully the audience has ever seen," says Mark Howard, founder of the Trinity Academy of Irish Dance. "It's always for a good cause."

Kelly reiterates that a person doesn't have to be of Irish descent to join the party. "We welcome everyone. ... Our roots are based in the Irish heritage. That culture is about celebrating with friends and family and helping people. That's what we do."

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When: 6:30 p.m. Friday

Where: Park West, 322 W. Armitage Ave.

Tickets: \$55-\$75;

youngirish.com

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