

Teen-led Irish fest aids Cato parish

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

CATO — The idea to honor St. Patrick and the Irish in October rather than March might raise eyebrows — that and the fact that this major parish event was being organized by six teenaged girls. Truth be told, Amanda Dillon and her crew had their own doubts in the early stages.

"We were really scared. Once, we said 'You guys, what if this doesn't work?' And then we decided not to think about it at all," recalled Amanda, 18.

Firmly moving forward, the teens attached themselves to their mission for several months. The result was a hugely successful Irish festival held October 28, 2001, at St. Patrick's Church in Cato, Cayuga County. The fundraising event raised \$4,000.

Parish leaders recalled the project when nominating Amanda for a diocesan Hands of Christ Award, given to high-school seniors for outstanding service in church, school and community. Amanda, who received her award in the fall of 2002, is active in St. Patrick's choir as a vocalist and instrumentalist. Yet despite this involvement, Amanda recalled that two years ago she wished to do more in light of the debt St. Patrick's had incurred from its renovation project.

"It was time for the youth to get involved and do something. We just wanted to do something for the church because we never really had before," said Amanda, a lifelong St. Patrick's parishioner.

Amanda assembled a core group of other teens and began holding meetings at her house. Other committee members were her sister, Emily, along with St. Patrick's parishioners Renee Fairbrother, Christine MacDavitt, Molly McDonough and Erin Quinn. The parents of Amanda and Emily, Jim and Julie Dillon, provided guidance as well.

Eventually, the decision was made to hold an Irish celebration in place of the parish's annual harvest dinner. The teens also initiated a silent auction by gathering such donated items as crafts, gift certificates and antiques. Planning details involved several weekend trips to St. Patrick's as well as the two other churches in the Northern Cayuga Cluster — St. Joseph's in Weedsport and St. John's in Port Byron. Amanda gives special credit to the support shown by the cluster's former pastor Father William Leone, now the



Rebecca Gosselin/Catholic Courier

Amanda Dillon, a parishioner at St. Patrick Church in Cato, sits in the church's choir loft March 9 after playing the clarinet during Mass. Amanda and a handful of other teenaged parishioners helped raise money to offset church renovation costs.

pastor of St. Anne Parish in Rochester, saying that he believed in the teens' abilities "when other people didn't."

Gradually, Amanda said, the project got solid adult backing and participation all around, and that was reflected by the large crowd that gathered at St. Patrick's when the big day arrived. The six-hour celebration began with a chicken barbecue and Irish side dishes. Among the other highlights were final bidding for the silent auction; Irish entertainment with instrumentalists, vocalists and dancers; and storytelling that included a history of St. Patrick's Parish and how it was started by Irish immigrants.

The day was capped by a Mass in the newly renovated church that featured additional seating space as

well as updates to the choir loft, stained-glass windows and altar. However, Amanda noted, the renovation wasn't quite complete at that point: "We didn't have the pews up at the time, but we had chairs," she said.

Bolstered by the healthy turnout, the festival raised \$3,000 from the silent auction and \$1,000 from the dinner. All proceeds were put toward offsetting the parish's renovation expenses.

Though Amanda admitted her committee was "stressed out" by the time it was all over, they were finally able to enjoy the fruits of their hard work. "It went great. We couldn't have asked it to go any better," she said. "It sure felt good when it was pulled off. A lot of people said we should put it on college and job applications. They were very impressed."

Amanda is a senior at Cato-Meridian High School. She wishes to attend either Cornell University to major in entomology, the study of insects, or the State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry for wildlife biology. "I really love the outdoors," she said.

Whatever her future endeavors; Amanda — as well as other teen committee members — can recall their work on the Irish festival as a significant symbol of success.

"It definitely helped my self-confidence. I never did anything that big before," she said.

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