

Irish Echo Honoree: **PUBLIC SERVICE**

# Pipes and Drums of the Emerald Society, NYPD

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Given the long and storied connection between the Irish and the New York Police Department, you would assume that the department's fabled Emerald Society Pipes and Drums dates back to the 19th century or so.

Indeed, it's hard to imagine the Saint Patrick's Day parade, a civic ceremony, a police funeral, without the skirl of the pipes and the beat of the drums.

It turns out, however, that the Emerald Society's pipers and drummers are preparing to celebrate their 50th anniversary in less than two years.

Fifty years! That makes the band relative newcomers in a city that measures its history in centuries, in a department that can trace its origins to the middle of the 19th Century.

Just as surprising, one of the band's charter members remains active in the band, even if he has been retired from the NYPD for nearly a quarter of a century.

Brian Meagher was just 18 years old in 1960 when his father, Tom, and uncle, Pearse, founded the band at the request of the department's Emerald Society, which itself was only about four years old at the time.

"We're the granddaddy of all of the service bands," Meagher said.

"We spurred on the other service bands in the city and in other places, too."

Meagher has good reason to be proud of the band's roots. The story of one of the world's most-famous pipe bands is linked to the story of his own family.

Meagher's immigrant grandfather insisted that Tom and Pearse learn the art of the bagpipe at a time when the pipes were not nearly as ubiquitous as they are today.

Even in the Irish Bronx, where the Meaghers grew up in the 1920s, the sounds of pipes were, well, not necessarily familiar, nor indeed particularly welcome.

"My father was asked to move out of his apartment because of the pipes," Meagher recalled with a laugh. "Neighbors were pounding on the ceiling."

Ogden Nash once observed that fences made for good neighbors. Bagpipes, however, may not be as congenial.

Tom and Pearse Meagher played in competitions in their youth, and kept playing after joining the NYPD, Tom in 1930, Pearse a decade later.

Back then, the uniformed services had bands, but they were conventional bands — it was a case of no pipers need apply.

But after City Hall eliminated funding for the service bands in the mid-1950s, the department's newly formed Emerald Society came up with a brilliant stroke: a pipe and drum corps of its own.

The society turned to the piping Meagher family for guidance and instruction, and the band was formed just in time to celebrate the election of John F. Kennedy as president.

Brian Meagher learned the pipes from his father and uncle and became one of the band's first members even before he joined the department.

Early on, the band allowed civilians to play, but no more.

"We lived on Willis Avenue in the Bronx where everybody was Irish," he said.

"I didn't even know there were non-Irish people in New York when I was a kid." Even still, his practice of wearing a kilt every now and again made him something of a curiosity in the neighborhood.

Meagher followed his father into the NYPD in 1963 and

served 21 years, retiring as a sergeant. The Emeralds allow retirees to play, so Meagher hasn't missed a step since hanging up his uniform.

The NYPD Emeralds have become a part of the city's culture, playing not only at Irish-American functions, but at nearly any civic commemoration.

The St. Patrick's Day Parade is led up Fifth Avenue by the Fighting 69th and is then followed by lead units and the grand marshal. But for many, the parade really doesn't kick into full gear until the moment that the NYPD Emeralds turn the corner onto the avenue and unleash the power of their lungs.

Other functions include funerals, especially those of fellow officers killed in the line of duty. They have been playing funerals, when requested, since 1970. It is an assignment that never becomes routine.

For many years, the pipes and drummers were led by the imposing and towering figure of band major, Sergeant Finbar Devine, a founding member of both the Emerald Society and its band a few years later.

Well over six feet to begin with, Devine seemed to scrape the clouds when he wore his busby. Devine became the public face of the band.

When the pipes finally called Finbar in 1995, his funeral Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral was packed with all ranks.

And of course his funeral procession was led by his beloved pipes and drums.

Bandmaster at the time, John Tansey summed up Devine's legacy thus: "It didn't matter where we went, Philadelphia, Chicago, wherever, there was always someone shouting 'Finbar, Finbar,' trying to get him to look over. Of course he wouldn't. And we'd always think, 'Who knows him here?'"



**Above:** The NYPD Emerald Society Pipe and Drum band, seen here marching in the Staten Island St. Patrick's Day Parade.

**Right:** Retired sergeant Brian Meagher of the NYPD Emeralds and his son, also Brian, who teaches the pipes, are presented with a plaque by Belfast Lord Mayor Tom Hartley during a visit to the city.



One who did get to know Devine was Pope John Paul II who was regaled by the Devine-led band during his historic visit to New York in 1979.

The band has played and is known all over the country and of course has crossed the ocean to Ireland.

Members have also helped start other bands in cities such as Chicago.

Arguably its most memorable performance was also its most controversial. The band played at a 1982 commemoration in Bundoran, County Donegal, for the hunger strikers who died in 1981 to protest Britain's refusal to recognize IRA and INLA detainees as political prisoners.

British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher protested the band's participation in the ceremony, and critics in New York added their own condemnations. The NYPD brass were also unhappy as was the U.S. State Department. The Irish government of the day couldn't turn away the pipe-playing cops from New York, but it didn't exactly throw out the red carpet.

Nevertheless, Brian

Meagher had no problem with the band's participation.

"That was the turning point, the deaths of those 10 young men," he said.

"When you look at all that's happened recently, it all started with the hunger strike."

Meagher's two sons, meanwhile have kept the family tradition alive and, well, blowing. Brian Meagher Jr. is a well-known instructor, a job which the senior Meagher says is not for the faint of heart.

"Teaching pipers is like taming wild lions," he said. Another son, Justin, served in the NYPD for several years before he became a lawyer. As a retiree, he is eligible to join his father in the band his grandfather and great-uncle founded.

Brian Meagher has good reason to be proud of the NYPD Emeralds Pipes and Drums.

But then again, he is far, far from being alone.

*The Irish Echo Award for Public Service will be accepted on behalf of the Pipes and Drums of the Emerald Society, NYPD, by Sgt. Brian Coughlin.*



The Pipes and Drums of the Emerald Society, New York Police Department.