

Fall 2024

Getting to Know... Alex Brown

Alex has only belonged to the club for three years, but he stepped up and filled a vacant position on the board in 2022, and this year he was elected president. He's very recognizable, always dressed in his tweeds and suspenders, and dancing almost every dance each Tuesday. I found out that he also has a thoughtful, serious side. Read on to get a nuanced view of your new club president.



I'll brag). The Pittsburgh Ceili Club and its people mean a lot to him. He is honored to have been elected president and has a vision for the club that is rooted in his respect for tradition. Alex believes that receiving handed-down traditions is like bearing a torch. Traditions can change, but they should change cautiously and only after gaining a thorough understanding.

Alex's family was originally from Overbrook, and moved to a bigger house in South Park when he was born. He is the fourth of five sons, and also has a younger sister (all of them have names that begin with A!). Alex says he loved growing up in South Park, very suburban but close to everything. It was a young neighborhood, with lots of other kids to play with. He also liked being the middle child. His older brothers got all the chores, and he had the freedom to develop himself and develop independence.

Alex has seven nephews and three nieces. He lived in Virginia for a while, but now he and most of his siblings live within ten minutes of where they grew up. His sister's family lives in Virginia, but he hopes they will return to the South Hills of Pittsburgh. One brother is in Cambridge, MA, applying his PhD in medical research.

Alex joined the PCC as a result of a conversation with me and Al when we were working the table at the Irish Festival in 2021 (not to brag or anything, but, okay,

Our new president says that his biggest influence outside his family has been his banjo teacher, Adam Hurt. Alex first heard Adam at a house concert fifteen years ago, and fell in love with his music. His relationship with Adam has opened many social and professional doors for Alex. They did a project together to research and reproduce traditional Pennsylvania music. Over 100 years ago, some people got together with some elderly musicians who were still playing traditional Western PA music from the mid-nineteenth century, mostly rural and martial music. Fortunately, they wrote it all down in notation, and Alex and Adam had access to that and continue to preserve it.

Alex's biggest obstacle has been his health. He has to manage Type 1 diabetes, which can also be expensive. His family has been his biggest support.

Alex was frank with me about some regrets he has about his life. He majored in the humanities, and wishes he had obtained a more useful degree, but went on to earn his master's in business administration. He regretted not

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It was another family wedding! In both of my favorite towns in Ireland, Ardara (wedding) and Letterkenny (reception), Co. Donegal. We started and finished in Dublin with some new and old sights in between.

Giles took to the left side of the road upon hitting the gas and we soon filled our first day. Breakfast with my cousin Kathleen & our friend Tomas outside Griffith College where he works. After a nap at Blooms Hotel in Temple Bar, Tomas and wife, Anne, picked us up for dinner with Kathleen and sister, Sadie at Ryans at Parkgate Street near the entrance to Phoenix Park. Tomas, always the master of all things Dublin, had to do a drive through the park first to see if the President was at home. He was, but not receiving visitors.

Next morning was a tour of Glasnevin Cemetery with the same merry bunch. (I had wanted to finally tour Kilmainham Gaol but the date sold out faster than a Taylor Swift concert.) I was interested in more history and the cemetery tour delivered. "Glasnevin Cemetery owes its origins to Daniel O'Connell. As part of his work to advance the rights of Catholics, he established the Dublin Cemeteries Committee in 1828 to provide dignified burial space "for those of all religions and none." Young Michael Carey was the first burial in 1832 and there was a funeral on the day of our tour. They're buried among patriots named Parnell, de Valera, Gonne and Casement, artists like Behan, Brown and Kelly and 1.5 million others. Michael Collins has an admirer from France who kisses his cross with lipstick which the traces of can't be removed. Lunch followed at Gravediggers which has all its old charm intact but with tapas on the menu. I've no doubt the original patrons of this pub are chuckling at its present popularity. Both cemetery and pub are in the "dead center of Dublin" so says Tomas.

The Pittsburgh GAA was also in Ireland playing football by day and pubs by night and finished in Dublin the day after we arrived. So it was somewhat serendipitous for Kathleen and Sadie on my mother's side (who traveled from Co. Fermanagh & Wales to spend the weekend in Dublin with us), daughter Maria, and two nieces on Giles's side (on tour with the GAA) to meet in the street in the Temple Bar district of Dublin. So much Pittsburgh was in the house in Temple Bar that night!

Portrush, Co. Antrim was our next destination but on the way we made a stop at the Crosskeys Inn, oldest thatched pub in Ireland, built in 1654. They take such pride in their Guinness, the glasses used are washed separately from any dishes used for food. In Portrush, we had dinner at the Harbour Bar. Both these pubs

are proclaimed as two of the best day pubs in Ireland. Harbour's bistro has delicious food, making it a great night spot too.

Portrush is a lovely holiday destination on the coast and near many of the Game of Throne sites. Dark Hedges is an amazing avenue of beech trees planted over two centuries ago along a narrow road leading to a former estate. Dunluce Castle ruins along the Causeway Coastal Route is a dramatic scene perched on a cliff along this gorgeous coastline. Giles climbed among the rocks at Ballintoy Harbour, a beautiful spot that inspires painters, but we watched a group of teenage boys learn to swim in the frigid Atlantic! Bushmills Distillery tasting, after the



tour, taught us that distilled rainwater was the best choice to enhance the flavor of this drink.

We arrived in Derry in time to enjoy the wonderful singing of Gerry Breslin from Derry at Peadar O'Donnells. Great night of song and Guinness ensued. Buy Gerry's CD! We were staying at The Lawrence, an exquisite boutique hotel that started as a family home 100 years ago, became a convent for 40 years until it was bought and renovated by the present owners. Each room is named after an Irish poet. I had already booked a walking tour of Derry for 2pm the next day but the owner's brother also did tours at 10am every morning so we decided to do that tour as well. At 10am we met Ruari who told us he had been in Pittsburgh in the early 90s with the Ireland Institute, which he claims saved his life. His honest and open dialog of his life was intertwined with the history of his time in Derry as a young man, "the troubles" and the Derry of 1500 years ago. Our 2pm guide, David of Derry Danders was entertaining, informative and had us contemplating just how far Derry has come while

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getting married when he had the chance and would still like to have a family but admits that he is stubborn and might be hard to get along with.

As he mentioned when talking about the club, tradition is very important to Alex. He sees his life's work as carrying on local folk arts traditions.

But the most important thing is his life is his faith. His family had always been Catholic, but changed to Protestant before he was born. He grew up in St. Clair Bible Chapel, a Plymouth Brethren church, more commonly known as South Hills Bible Chapel. Now he is a reformed Baptist. He says that his religion informs his daily life and how he treats people.

What he's good at: Music – banjo, fiddle, uilleann pipes, guitar. His whole family is musical.

What he's bad at: Flexibility, being on time.

What he's proud of: Earning respect in the music world, and overcoming generational problems in his family.

His philosophy of life in ten words: Do what you love with people you love.

Pet Peeve: People who are rude or who aren't emotionally self-aware.

Pets: An African Grey parrot, Jango, who has adopted his mother's voice, which he has had since he was 20.

Alex in five words: gregarious, stubborn, anxious, devoted, impulsive

What little Alex wanted to be when he grew up: A pyrotechnician. He still really likes fireworks, and loves being the uncle that brings fireworks to the family Independence Day picnic.

How Irish is Alex? Genetically: 12.5%. Personality: 100%.

From Tying the Shoe to Tying the Knot

Love has certainly been in the air at the Harp for the past several months. We have another engaged couple!



Brandon Messineo and Alicia Loy hadn't come to ceili for several weeks, and when they returned on July 9, Alicia had a ring on her finger.

The happy couple met at Hinge Fest in February of 2021, and had a long-distance relationship for a few months while Alicia still lived in West Virginia. They became a couple later that year, and Alicia joined Brandon in Pittsburgh.

On June 15, they were getting ready to go to the zoo. Brandon's shoe was (conveniently) untied, and when he bent down to tie it, he got down on one knee and . . . there was a ring in his hand. So romantic!

Brandon and Alicia are planning a wedding in spring or fall of 2026. (*Props to Hannah Hogan for the cute name for this article.*)

The Ring

My grandfather, Michael O'Connell, was born in Abbeydorney, County Kerry, Ireland in 1843. He owned a small farm where he lived with his wife and brother, Thomas. The British were planning to take his farm because he owed taxes; so, he sold his cattle and hid his wife's gold wedding ring in the floorboards with a few other items. The British soldiers eventually threw him in jail. Shortly after his wife died, my grandfather and four other men escaped from jail and made their way to America in 1890. They landed in North Irwin, Pennsylvania, where I was born. My grandfather wanted to get married again, so he sent his brother to Ireland (under a new name) to retrieve the ring from the floorboards and send it to him in America. After getting the ring from Ireland, he was married two more times, including to my grandmother, Nora Flaherty, who lived with my family until her death in 1938.



When I married Chuck McHugh in 1956, I used this ring as my wedding ring. We will be married 68 years on June 30, 2024. I have worn the ring every day for all this time. If only this ring could talk! What a journey! Chuck and I are in our nineties now and are among the founding members of the Pittsburgh Ceili club in 1989. The ring will be passed on to another O'Connell bride.

by Eileen O'Connell McHugh



Heads Up on Winter Ceilíer

I will need your help in the Winter edition of the Ceilíer. I will be on vacation the first half of October and again the first half of December, so it is going to be hard for me to write enough to fill eight pages. And I will miss the Christmas Ceilí entirely. That's where you come in! Here is what I need:

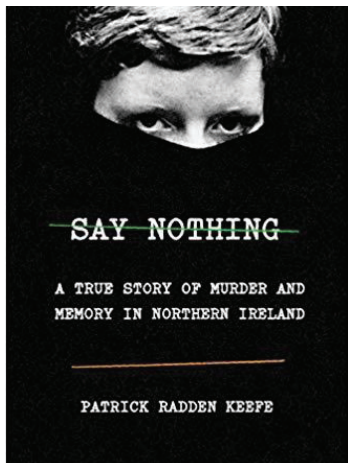
1. A volunteer to write an article about the Christmas Ceilí and send it to Jim within a few days of the event. I can provide past Christmas Ceilí articles as examples.
2. A volunteer to take photos at the Christmas Ceilí and send them to Jim within a few days of the event.
3. My time for writing articles between my two vacations will be really limited, so I also need people to write short, long or medium-length articles on the following topics:
 - a. What you did over the summer (include photos). Need lots of these!
 - b. Your favorite Christmas traditions or happiest Christmas memories (include photos). Need lots of these, too.
 - c. Any recent or upcoming life events in your family. Include photos.
 - d. Reviews of books about Ireland or Irish-Americans. Include a photo of the book cover.
 - e. Recipes! Especially Christmas foods or hot, comforting winter foods. Include a photo if possible.
 - f. ANY other topic that you think would be of interest to club members. Here's your chance to be creative. Include at least one photo.

Come on, those of you with a secret desire to write, or just anyone who has a story they want to share. Help me out, here! Please let me know by end of October if you can contribute. Then I will need the article and any photos no later than November 20, so I can aggregate everything and send to Jim Guay (other than Christmas Ceilí article and photos; as noted above, those should go directly to Jim). Thank you so much!!!

- Kathy Bashaar



Book Review - "Say Nothing"



I didn't know very much about the era of The Troubles in Northern Ireland. My maternal grandmother's ancestors came from Northern Ireland, but it was generations ago, so I didn't have an axe to grind, either. But I found this book very hard to put down.

The author did an excellent job of making his readers really care about the key people in the story that he tells. He focuses on Jean McConville, a young widow with ten children, who was "disappeared" by the IRA in 1972, and on two sisters, Dolours and Marian Price, who were members of the "Provos" (the Provisional IRA), and Gerry Adams, another Provo who ended up as a prominent Irish politician. He sets up the mystery of what happened to Jean and slowly unravels it as he tells the larger story of the actions of the Provos, the British Army, and the local Belfast police during the period of violence and the uneasy peace that followed.

Almost nobody comes off well in this story. The Army, the police, and the IRA all commit appalling acts of perfidy and violence. The only real heroes in this story are a few compassionate prison guards, one priest who buried the dead, comforted the mourning, and worked doggedly to end the civil war, and poor Jean McConville, who made the mistake of trying to help a wounded British soldier. Gerry Adams comes off especially badly, as an opportunist who turned on both friend and foe, then took credit for the peace and claimed never to have been part of the IRA.

Extremist Americans who talk about how maybe we "need" a civil war, take heed. Civil wars are rarely like the one we had in the 1860s, with troops marching and fighting on battlefields in neat rows. They are more like what Keefe describes in this book: morally murky, with more innocents than combatants killed, lots of backstabbing, and everyone living in a constant atmosphere of threat.

Liz Grinko owns this book and has been lending it out. It is definitely worth reading.

A Passionate Quilter - P. J. Kernick

My maternal grandmother always had an old-fashioned quilting frame in her house because she and other women in her church held quilting bees where they'd sit around the quilt frame, probably gossip, and quilt whatever quilt was mounted to the frame. The quilting bee quilts were sold or auctioned through church fundraisers. Since that time, I've always loved handmade quilts.

It wasn't until my oldest sister Sally was a stay-at-home mom about 40 years ago and learned how to machine piece quilt tops that I got the quilting bug. It has mostly been an on- and off-hobby for me. Now that I'm retired though, one of my goals is to improve my quilt piecing skills.

My other sister Cindy started to quilt, too, and the three of us would spend at least part of our time together sharing our quilt ideas and the newest pattern or fabric we came across. Cindy's quilts would've won awards had she entered them in quilt shows.

Below are some samples of some of my quilts with image background removed. Several of the pictures show the quilt tops before adding batting and backing and then finishing with quilting and binding. Most of the quilts shown are throw or lap robe size. All of these quilts were sent to a long-arm quilter to quilt the layers together. Modern life has advantages!



This pattern is called Dragon Glass. Lots of bias seams in this one. Yikes!

This pattern is called Dominique and was made with just three yards of fabric.



This pattern is called Three, Six, Nine, but was modified to make the blocks smaller since I donated it to the NICU at Magee and NICU quilts need to be much smaller for the preemies.

This is a traditional nine patch block. When I was recovering from surgery many years ago, my sister Cindy brought me a bunch of 1930s reproduction fabric so I



could sew and stay busy while housebound. I think the thirties fabric is perfect for a traditional quilt block quilt.



This pattern is called Trip for Two to Boston. My sister Cindy and I took a class. The pattern makes two quilts. The colors in the second quilt start with green in the center and move out to blue on the outside.

This pattern is called X-quisite. Cats love quilts.



This is a crazy quilt which includes embellishments using embroidery, lace, beading, etc. These quilts are meant to hang on the wall and were a very popular quilting technique after the first sewing machines became available.

This pattern is from a Welsh Wool Quilt originally made using men's old suits. I found the pattern in one of my quilting books. I used flannel to make it.



This pattern is called Floral Bouquet. The flower blocks were made using a package of precut fabric called Bali Pops, a collection of coordinating batik fabric.

Many quilt shops offer Quilt of the Month Block classes. This particular project called for paper piecing the colorful center miniature blocks. Paper pieced quilts are made by printing the block pattern on paper and then cutting pieces of fabric to sew to the paper before removing the paper. The look of the block is very crisp with perfect points when using this technique. I like the way the colors pop against the black and white.



YOUR NEW PCC BOARD

President: Alex Brown

Vice President: Stevie Hogan

Secretary: Craig Connelly

Pittsburgh native of three decades. Penn State - Bachelor of Mechanical Engineering. Software Tester at Ansys Inc. Coming up on a decade of being a Ceili dancer and just recently becoming a novice Ceili caller. Avid movie fan, amateur gamer, recreational backpacker / canoeist / owl enthusiast, and mentally having a glass half full outlook on life that aids in my "pour" sense of humor.



Members at large:

Alex Canto

Alex's parents met dancing. Growing up he participated when they taught ballroom and international folk dance.

He met his wife Anna swing dancing in the San Francisco bay area. In 2011 He started ceili dancing at the Starry Plough in Berkeley, CA. After moving to Phoenix, AZ and finding a lack of costume ball dance events or ceilis in pubs, he started teaching set dancing at Phoenix Comicon. He has been dancing with the Pittsburgh ceili club since early 2022.



Sue Anne Hogan

I'm a 70 year old retired Respiratory Therapist. I grew up in Avalon, PA. I attended 16 years of Catholic schooling. I have 3 grown children and two young granddaughters. I've been doing all kinds of dancing for over 20 years and it has been a joy to meet and befriend so many folks through it.



Pam Stewart

You will find bios of most board members in this issue, including an in-depth article about President Alex Brown. Bios of Stevie and Pam were not received in time for this issue. Look for them in the Winter Ceilier!

Upcoming Local Irish Events

What	When	Where	Contact & Information
The Grubbs	Sep 5, 7p	Schenley Plaza, Oakland	
Pittsburgh Irish Festival	Sep 6-8	Carrie Furnace Site	https://pghirishfest.org/
Abbot's Cross	Sep 8, 7:30	City Winery, 1615 Smallman St.	
Victor Wainwright & Friends.	Sep 20, 7:30	The Original Pittsburgh Winery, . 2809 Penn Ave	www.calliopehouse.org .
Trey Wellington & Band	Oct 25, 7:30	The Original Pittsburgh Winery, . 2809 Penn Ave.	www.calliopehouse.org
Allison Brown	June 23	The Original Pittsburgh Winery, . 2809 Penn Ave.	www.calliopehouse.org
LAOH Division 11 Monte Carlo Night	Oc 19, 6	Salvatore's, 5001 Curry Rd.	Contact Shirley Sestric at 412.370.4127 or shirleysestric@gmail.com
PCC Kickoff Ceili	Mar 7, 2025	Teamsters Temple	Mark your calendar! More info to come!

Thanks, as always, to Diane Byrnes, host of Echoes of Erin, for most of this event information. Listen to Echoes of Erin at 12:30 Sunday afternoons on WEDO 810 AM or 93.3 FM.



Irish... con't.

standing on its walls. From one vantage point, we could see all at once the Guildhall, Peace Bridge and the former British army barracks, now a cultural hub featuring huge concerts. And the Derry Girls are celebrated as proud ambassadors, as if to say just look at how far we've come.

Letterkenny is a 30 minute drive from Derry so we arrive at the bride's parents home for dinner on Tuesday evening. (Yes, it's just 3 days later!) It was Donegal salmon but I can't tell you how it was acquired. Anthony, my cousin and Dad's nephew, and wonderful wife, Kathleen, were our hosts for a couple days with long chats far into the night and catching up with them, their children and grandchildren. Wednesday morning we met my brother Peter and his friend, Joe who's family is also in Letterkenny for a driving tour of the west of Donegal. Or so I thought. Joe thought it would be good to see the west from the top of Mount Errigal, the tallest peak in Donegal. With a "why not" attitude and a backpack full



of water and libations, we proceeded. I don't have much experience with hiking mountains so I didn't consider how a peak would eventually mean traveling upwards at a sharper vertical rate. The wind was wicked but we pressed on for absolutely NO reason except for bragging rights. We thought our venture very impressive but we met at least 50 others climbing at various elevations that day (any day) and Anthony had a friend who used to climb it every Sunday! Following our climb, we drove through the Gaeltacht area along the beautiful rugged coast and finished with a delicious lunch at Teac Jack where Joe's 13 year old nephew ordered his lunch in Gaeilge. And the waiter responded in Gaeilge. And you'll never guess... they have a ceili every Tuesday night. And a Ceili Mor the 1st Sunday of the month. I'm seeing a PCC road trip in the future. We'll talk.

Thursday we arrived in Ardara with lunch at Nancy's Pub and the evening at the best pub in Donegal, the Corner House. A group of the Donegal Shovlin clan gathered,

cousins Martina, Teresa Bernadette, Rosemary, Noeleen, Mary & Jon, along with Dad, my sister, Sheila and Giles & I, arrived around 6ish with plans of staying a few hours and then we stayed till midnight. Conversations flew up



and down and then songs from a local singer worthy of a bigger stage.

There are several lovely shops in Ardara but one in particular stands out and that is Campbell's of Ardara. The windows are professionally dressed and draw you in to shop. What keeps you there is its owner and proprietor, Hugh Campbell. If there was ever a contest of how often the "f" word could be used in a conversation, Hugh would win Every. Single. Time. He is hilarious. He's on top of every subject, whether we can tell or not, because he's just so entertaining you believe him. He offered to drive Dad back to our B&B. When he wasn't turning around I asked where he was going he responded "for F's sake Liz I'm not kidnapping you!" Giles saved Hugh's parking spot while conversing with Hugh's wife and drinking a glass of whiskey she had poured for him. Hugh is also the talented photographer behind the Facebook page, Ardara Town, which features stunning photos of the town and surrounding areas.

The chat flowed Friday filled with cousins in Rosbeg and Kennaughty, areas just outside the town. Patsy, Mary and Hugh Peter, Dad's nephews and niece, are always so thrilled to welcome Dad home. We split time with them and their families. Patsy's home in Rosbeg sits on the edge of a little cliff and we ate more salmon (again, can't tell you how it was acquired) while watching the Atlantic crash against Tramore Beach. Peter and his son, Aidan, joined our Pittsburgh contingency for dinner in Kennaughty. There were about 100 different conversations happening all at once. Outside Mary's front door you can watch the daily tidal changes in the bay from the Atlantic just a few miles west.

The wedding day has arrived! Catriona & D.J. were wed on a beautiful sunny day in the Church of the Holy Family at the edge of town. The celebrant was Fr. Kelly, uncle of the groom who sprinkled the ceremony with quips and

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his banter entertained.



There were a few hours until the reception in Letterkenny. Our Errigal leader Joe's delightful mother, Helen, had us all for tea on our way into town. Her lunch spread and welcome was as mighty as the Errigal winds.

The Silver Tassie Hotel is like the best pub in Ireland only with much more staff, more nooks, wine

glasses and larger dance floor. It's a hotel but you still get that small pub feeling. Speeches from the fathers, best man and groom were heartfelt and funny. After dinner we danced to the amazing music of Red Alert. At a break, the many cousins from Pittsburgh did an Irish dance number. At midnight, the drummer turned DJ and the dancing continued until 2am. I did my first "rock the boat!"

Weddings in Ireland weren't always a two day event. At some stage it was decided one wasn't enough and I heartily agree. So the next night we were at it again albeit in a smaller venue...the groom's family home which was once a pub! Our own voices were a substitute for a band.

That morning though, Giles and I headed 30 minutes north to Fanad and the prettiest spot in Ireland, at the Fanad Lighthouse and the second most northern point in Ireland. Prior to 2016, it was so remote an area only those who lived close by traveled the roads leading there. You'd pull over to the side of the road to photograph the lighthouse from afar. But the "Wild Atlantic Way" marketing program changed



all that. Ahead of us in line for tickets was a group from India. Behind us was a family from Mexico. They had 60,000 visitors last year. But mostly I was there because my mother was raised in the shadow of the lighthouse in Ballymichael. Mom was born in Doaghcrabbin, just a few miles south of the lighthouse, where we stopped to see more cousins who were ready with more tea and conversation. This is also the home where Kathleen and Sadie's father was born.

We headed back down to Dublin for our flight out the next day where we stayed with Tomas and Anne. We became friends with Tomas when he lived in Pittsburgh for a year in 1980. Tomas was part of a large group being trained here for eventual work in Ireland. That was an EPIC year in our lives, parties and plans of some kind or other every weekend. Suffice it to say, we know where each other's bodies are buried. We come together in a very comfortable way. They brought us to one of the best spots in Dublin (besides their home), Bray Harbour where we tried skipping stones into the Irish Sea. And then to another great pub (honestly, are there any bad ones?), the Harbour Bar.



This was my "baker's dozen" trip to Ireland. Many of my cousins have been to visit here as well. Anthony once said to me that it was important we nurture our relationships to continue the connections for our children and so on. We don't take for granted the moments we gather and reconnect for even just a night in the pub, a meal in someone's home and to celebrate each like a wedding. And it is those connections that draw us there, the always warm welcomes and never ending new sights to see.

But I'm happy to say home is Pittsburgh and a very special connection for me is our gathering on Tuesday nights as the music starts and we meet and connect with each other once more on the dance floor.

By Liz Grinko

REMINDERS:

Don't forget that you can now pay for membership dues, event admission and apparel via Venmo or credit card.

Venmo address for payment is @PghCeiliClub. Please add a 2% tip to cover the Venmo processing fee.

You can use your credit card any Tuesday night at the Harp and at PCC events. Sorry, but we are unable to process credit card payments without the physical presence of both your card and our processing device.

Ceilier STAFF: Editor- Kathy Bashaar; Layout- Jim Guay

If you have an article of Irish interest that you would like to place in The Ceilier- email kbashaar@gmail.com.