

# How Philadelphia's Irish Community Came Together to Save the Irish Center

*Center President Sean McMenamin led the nine-year transformational journey*

PHILADELPHIA, PA, UNITED STATES, May 16, 2023 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Philadelphia's prized Irish Center, formally named the [Commodore John Barry Arts and Cultural Center](#), is celebrating a pivotal moment in its history – its transition from an institution threatened with closure to one that has new life serving more than 12,000 people annually.

The man behind this remarkable transformation is Center President Sean McMenamin who in 2014, when he was in his 70s and retired, began investing every ounce of his energy, dedication, and passion into saving this unifying symbol of cultural heritage for Philadelphia's Irish community.

“

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*Rosaleen McWilliams Rotondi,  
President of the Derry Society*

Nine years later, McMenamin, now in his 80s, has achieved a transformation that would challenge the best experts at the peak of their careers.

Since its establishment in 1958, the Irish Center has been the central gathering place of support, camaraderie, and connection to heritage for Philadelphia's large Irish community.

But by 2014, it was on life support facing permanent closure. The Center was in need of major repairs, membership had dwindled, the Irish population was aging, and there was nothing going on to attract a new generation of young people.

Back then, it wasn't unusual for a community meeting to be interrupted by torrents of water



Irish Center President Sean McMenamin

running down walls if it was raining.

Sean McMenamin's ability to bring together the community in support of his vision to save the Center was fundamental to its transformation and sustainability for the long term.

The Irish community, business and city leaders, labor unions, Center members and volunteers, donors, and supporters all rallied around Sean to achieve success in these critical areas:

1. Shareholders were persuaded to surrender their holdings enabling the Center to transition to a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.
2. New revenue streams due to the 501(c)(3) opened up for the Center, including grants, sponsorships and significant fundraising.
3. Back taxes and certain loans have been fully paid.
4. Local unions donated the labor to renovate the 118-year-old, 12,000 square-foot, two-story building, which needed major, costly repairs.
5. The local Irish community donated the funds to pay for the materials used in the renovation.
6. The Center's establishment as a cultural hub brought the Irish community back in record numbers and for the first time is attracting individuals and families of all ages and backgrounds. Many diverse groups and organizations sponsor activities and call the Center their home.

"If it wasn't for Sean McMenamin, there would be no Irish Center. He brought it back to life," said Rosaleen McWilliams Rotondi, President of the Derry Society who has been coming to the Irish Center since she was 8. "It means something to have the Irish Center, and Sean is a major part of that."

Philadelphia attorney Lisa Maloney, formerly with the Ballard Spahr law firm, led the pro bono work to create the 501(c)(3) and negotiate the payment of the back taxes and debt restructuring.



College Acting Class in the Irish Center's Library



Brazilian Drummers Practicing in the Irish Center's Ballroom

She described McMenamin as “absolutely instrumental” to the Center’s survival and its growing community involvement. “He has the ability to reach out and make things happen,” she said.

Lisa continued, “While the Irish Center has come a long way since 2014, it still has a way to go to reach its full potential and realize Sean’s vision. To that end, the Irish Center’s strategic plan involves partnering with local, national, and international resources to bring wide-ranging cultural programming to the Irish Center, as well as to achieve long-term financial stability enabling the Irish Center to continue to thrive for generations to come. The all-volunteer Board, empowered by Sean’s enthusiasm and energy, is committed to this outcome.

Pari Livermore, whose philanthropic work, along with Kathy McGee Burns, aided in the Center’s financial recovery, said McMenamin saved it in perpetuity for people from all walks of life.

“What Sean did was enormous,” she said. “He saved Irish culture for the people of Philadelphia and now people young and old have a grand and gorgeous place to experience the rich Irish cultural traditions of music, dance, and storytelling. They are learning what it means to be Irish, and they are proud.”

The Irish Center is not only surviving, it’s thriving. Visitors to the Irish Center today find a community hub bustling with activity where people young and old from diverse backgrounds experience and explore cultural traditions. From music and dance events to team sports, and everything in between, there is something for everyone.

Marissa Berry, the Donegal Society's corresponding secretary, said no other Irish community has a Center like the one in Philadelphia.

“From the use of the ballroom to the quaintness of the fireside room all the way up to the library, it’s invaluable,” she said, adding that she will never forget her first visit to the Center as a child.

It feels, she said, as though she never left. “It’s not just about the physical space, it’s about the community that it cultivates,” she said. “It’s so hard to put into words the impact and the value behind the Irish Center. It’s about community.”

If you would like to share the story of this iconic Center and the extraordinary man behind its transformation, please reach out to us. We can share with you individuals who have been central to the Center's resurrection and to sustaining the organization that means so much to the community.

Visit the Irish Center's website.

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