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“The Meaning of St. Patrick’s Day: Turning Adversity into Opportunity”

St. Patrick's Day, although commonly celebrated in pubs and bars with green beer, plastic shamrocks, and flashy beads, has a whole other side to it, a side rooted in the extraordinary life of Ireland’s patron saint. St. Patrick was born in Britain and kidnapped as a teen. His captors brought him to Ireland and sold him into slavery. This period of his life was hellish. Imagine being ripped from one’s family, taken to a foreign land and forced to work as a shepherd, during long days and nights of cold and rain, far from the company of others, lonely and afraid.

St. Patrick came to regard his time enslaved as one of the most crucial parts of his spiritual development. While tending sheep, he contemplated his faith and developed a mission, centered on his Christian beliefs, that would transform his entire life and that of Ireland. What he determined to do was escape the bonds of slavery and return to Ireland to convert the Irish people, his previous captors, to the faith that had been his chief sustenance during his time of bondage.

Turning adversity into opportunity was one of St. Patrick's main character traits. St. Patrick faced fierce opposition during his time as a missionary in Ireland. He faced threats of violence mainly from those in positions of power who were threatened by his ideas. St. Patrick also faced opposition from the native Irish on purely ethnic grounds as he was seen as an outsider and didn't conform to social norms. He was an immigrant into Irish society, and was outcast, as many Irish immigrants to the United States were during the 19th century. However,

Patrick prevailed overcame this challenge by adopting many aspects of Irish culture into the distinctive Celtic form of Christianity that he established in Ireland.

He became one of the most successful missionaries in history. He baptized countless into the Christian faith and rose to the rank of bishop.

1500 years after St. Patrick, Irish immigrants to the US faced similar obstacles and discrimination. During the Great Famine, where widespread potato blight spread over the entire island and starvation quickly turned into despair millions of Irish were forced to seek a better life and relief from the desperate times in their beloved homeland. They bought tickets to America, where, as the songs had told them, the streets were lined with gold.

These immigrants survived rough journeys across the Atlantic in what came to be known as “coffin ships.” Exploitive ship operators cut corners, and subjected their passengers to inhumane conditions, resulting in an environment where starvation, thirst, and disease ran rampant. Packed like sardines in the bowels of the ships without access to fresh air, sleeping in cots piled on top of each other, subjected to filth, thirst, and starvation, many arrived so exhausted they were half-dead. But then worst of all, once on the shores of America, for those who survived the treacherous journey, their troubles did not cease, and they were met with derision by many Americans.

Many of their new American neighbors, full of nationalist vitriol, bigotry and hatred towards foreigners, regarded their new neighbors as "others," people to fear and exclude, rather than welcome. Irish Catholics were especially loathed because of their religion, their different ethnic traditions and the simple fact that they acted, spoke and looked different. Slumlords

operated tenements, in which multiple large families were packed into cramped living conditions, in which disease spread quickly. Nonetheless, these awful conditions had one advantage - they fostered a strong sense of community amongst the Irish. For those Irish immigrants seeking employment, their path was rocky at best. "No Irish Need Apply" signs dotted shop windows, letting them know exactly how welcome they were to their new home.

Following St. Patrick's spirit of perseverance, and his example of turning adversity into opportunity, the Irish immigrants began to prevail over dire circumstances. Early Irish immigrants harnessed the discrimination they experienced and turned it into motivation and fuel for their dreams. Through education, political activism, and business entrepreneurship, as each generation grew up, their social status grew, with each generation gaining greater levels of education and professional success. Today's Irish-Americans are CEOs, doctors, lawyers, and politicians and have achieved success in every possible aspect of life. Perhaps the most successful Irish-American, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, went on to become President of the United States

For me, St. Patrick's Day is about that quintessentially Irish trait of overcoming adversity; overcoming the obstacles in one's path and using them to move forward. Irish-Americans have traditionally done this by succeeding, professionally and personally, while at the same time honoring their responsibility to their community and the broader community of the United States.

I believe that St. Patrick's Day represents an opportunity both to reflect on the hard work and achievements of our ancestors, while also examining and remaining true to that legacy of the past. In my case, I've been given a unique opportunity to adopt the enduring legacy of St.

Patrick, and I've tried to incorporate St. Patrick's values into my own life and actions. Shortly before my second birthday, I was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer, rhabdomyosarcoma. For most of my childhood, I was the only person in my class who along with birthdays, Christmas, and other holidays, also celebrated remission anniversaries. I hope to embody his spirit of perseverance through fundraising for childhood cancer research. St. Patrick evangelized the Irish masses through public speaking and community gatherings. I hope to do the same for childhood cancer research. Medical research is a powerful tool, and I think a large part of the population is just unaware of it. Many people are unaware that cancer research has primarily focused on adults rather than children. Less than 4 percent of federal funding is directed towards childhood cancer research. Clinical trials and researchers are the most lethal weapon in the fight against cancer, and through my work with the St. Baldrick's Foundation, I hope to bring an end to childhood cancer, a plague that afflicts so many children.

On St. Patrick's Day we honor an extraordinary man who overcame incredible odds in realizing his mission, that of sharing his Christian faith with the Irish people. Early Irish immigrants to the United States took this trait with them on their voyage to the New World and built an incredible legacy of hard work and relentless optimism. The joyful spirit that permeates St. Patrick's Day celebrations across the world is a tribute to the life and values of Ireland's patron saint. Here in Atlanta, that is what brings an entire city together in the Annual St. Patrick's Day Parade as it has for the last 160 years. But amidst all that revelry and the countless pints of Guinness lifted in joyful celebration, what I also want us to remember is St. Patrick's incredible drive to overcome adversity as well as the responsibility that goes along with that remembrance.

Happy St. Patrick's Day!