

EVENTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Preston Jankowski Is WHB St. Patrick's Day Parade 2022 Grand Marshal, Finally

 9 minute  03/13/2022

 Douglas MacKaye Harrington



Preston Jankowski

In a long-overdue move, the members of the **Westhampton Beach Saint Patrick's Day Parade** Committee selected Preston Jankowski to lead the 2020 march down the green line on March 14 of that year. First suggested to the committee by long-time former Quogue resident Chris Kelsey via committee member Mike "Digger" Koziarz, this selection may just mark the East End's first grand marshal with an intellectual disability, but more importantly, this selection places the spotlight on a local icon beloved in his community.

Unfortunately, and obviously, the parade was canceled in 2020 due to COVID and canceled again in 2021, but the parade is on this year and Jankowski will, indeed, be leading the march down Main Street. "It is an honor and pleasure to have Preston as our grand marshal," Parade Committee President Tim Laube says, "It has been two years in the making, but his time has come."

Considering the title of WHB grand marshal has been reserved for Jankowski since 2020, he adds optimistically, "Can you believe it? I will be the only three-year grand marshal."

Get the Full Story

Now 67-years-old, born and raised in Quogue, Jankowski is the son of the late Lenny and Marie Jankowski, the brother of Phyllis Kessler, whom he refers to as “Sissy,” and the uncle of her children Jeff and Laura. “He has stayed so positive his whole life,” Laura says of her uncle. “He has always persevered in a positive high, that is why so many people love him.”



Preston Jankowski representing the WHB Knights of Columbus, with Billy Bradnick of WHB Fire Department

Jankowski’s unique way of viewing the world become apparent early into his childhood. “I did not know my brother was special until I was five years old,” his sister Phyllis recalls. “Preston and I would play like typical siblings. We were always inseparable, everything we did, we did together — from building go-carts to riding bikes. There was one thing that differentiated us from typical siblings: We never fought. Preston by nature is a very loving, caring person, with the most extraordinary imagination. ... He loved to climb trees, go fishing on the Quogue dock, and we would build and fly kites together, thanks to my father.”

What makes Jankowski truly special is his loyalty, his humor and his sociability — yes, he is very, very social. His cadre of friends and acquaintances runs from Westhampton to Hampton Bays, from the officers of the Quogue PD to the members of the Quogue FD, bartenders to barbers, caterers to card store owners, lifeguards to landscapers, politicians to public school teachers. Jankowski’s personality is infectious!

Growing up, the entire community of Quogue was a friend of Jankowski's and everyone looked out for him. The good people of this Norman Rockwell painting of a village afforded him the opportunity to grow up immersed in the community as a kid riding his bike around the village, hanging out on Jessup Avenue and spending summer days at the Quogue Village beach.

Sadly, after being hit by a car in his 20s, Jankowski was no longer able to ride the two-wheeled bike he had rolled through Quogue on, and he took to an adult three-wheeled tricycle that has become synonymous with his icon status. He not only wheeled about Quogue and Westhampton Beach regularly, but he also led the Coneheads in the WHB, Hampton Bays and Montauk St. Patrick Day parades for years. For those unfamiliar, the Coneheads are an exclusive group of locals that dress in colorful attire, wear the classic Saturday Night Live Conehead hats and dance down the parade routes. Now donated to a disabled veterans organization, Jankowski's tricycle was bright yellow and customized with a volunteer fire department flashing light that was indeed given to him by the members of the Quogue Fire Department who long ago made him an honorary member. Jankowski is also a member of the Knights of Columbus and an honorary Quogue Village Beach Lifeguard.

After his father's death in 2008, Jankowski's mother Marie, disabled by a brain aneurysm in 1986, was left alone to care for Jankowski. This 82-year-old woman was left in charge of her then-54-year-old son with strong opinions and a demanding social calendar. Marie was determined to maintain Jankowski's life in Quogue, and they made it work. She was the brains and he was the brawn — their synergy was a ballet of necessity. His strong arms opened jars, changed lightbulbs, took out the garbage and lifted his mother out of her chair when asked, and she, with one working hand, prepared breakfast, lunch and dinner every day, did the laundry (with his help carrying the hamper) and so on.

When Marie passed away in 2012, Jankowski's full-time life in Quogue came to an end. Thanks to Walter Stockton — founder, president and CEO of Independent Group Home Living (IGHL) and his former friend and teacher when he attended Maryhaven Center of Hope in 1969 — Jankowski found a new home at one of the IGHL houses in East Moriches. He was also introduced to Doreen Pittelli, a devoted DSP (Direct Support Professional) at his new home. "Preston has been such a staple in the community for so many years, it is an honor he well deserves," Stockton says of his grand marshal title. "I congratulate him and the parade committee for their vision in choosing him."



*Preston Jankowski leading the Coneheads in the
2010 WHB St. Patrick's Day parade*

Albeit limited the past two years because of COVID, close enough to Quogue, Jankowski's devoted friends like Donna Conti, Patrick Connor, Tommy Otis, the Quogue Village beach lifeguards Eric Buhl, Ryan Faye, Rich Harris, Sean Brand and Terry Moran find their way to Jankowski in East Moriches to visit and include him in events like the Knights of Columbus meetings, the Quogue Firehouse events, church services and Westhampton Beach High School football games, among other events and at-home hangouts. "You know, I have lots of friends," Jankowski states. "I love them and they love me, just like Sissy and Doreen love me."

The Westhampton Beach St. Patrick's Day Parade has been a seminal part of Jankowski's life since his 20s, marching first with the Quogue Fire Department, then leading the Coneheads down the green line for years on his iconic yellow tricycle, and then marching with the Knights of Columbus. And now it's finally time for him to lead the parade as grand marshal.

"Preston was such an obvious choice, I am surprised we did not do it earlier," Donna Conti of the WHB parade committee says. "He is such an integral part of the Quogue/Westhampton Beach community and has been for so many years. However, I will miss the yellow tricycle."

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