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A Bit 'o Irish Is Enough for Mad City Leprechaun

By Maureen Katherine Doll

He may only be a bit Irish, but there is a definite twinkle in Joe Herr's eye as speaks of work, leisure and life as a leprechaun. Yes, a leprechaun, Wisconsin variety. Sipping beer at Madison's Union Terrace, Herr candidly recalls the paths that led him to become project manager for a construction firm, founder of a non-profit organization and occasional sensation in a green top hat.

He calls it "a Halloween costume that grew wild." This March, Herr dyed his hair red, grew a beard and marched with shillelagh in hand around Madison's capitol in the Saint Patrick's Day Parade. Herr jokes it is his five-foot stature that qualifies him. But in costume, he assumes mythic proportions, with a long pipe and mischievous, cavalier air about him. He finds "the best, the biggest part is the joy it brings on kids' faces."

Bringing joy to children is a large part of this man, the creator of the non-profit organization Logan's Heart and Smiles. Herr's son Logan, born with cerebral palsy, died at the age of 4. Just days later, Herr decided to offer his services to families who find themselves in similar situations. A carpenter by trade, he adapts homes for children with special needs through additions such as ramps, fencing, enlarged doors and modified bathrooms. "I knew I was just supposed to do this," says Herr.

It is a simple operation, made up of one truck, some hand and power tools and, most importantly, Joe Herr. Now "a one-man band," he says the organization may grow, but adds "right now I like the intimacy." Working by night or on weekends, he does the work himself with occasional help from a friend. The tools and fasteners are borrowed from Tri-North Builders, where Herr has worked for 18 years, and materials are purchased largely with money he raises in an annual golf outing. The labor is free; Herr asks only that recipient give what they can to assist future families.

"It shouldn't be a luxury just to get your kid in and out of your house," Herr says. "Most people, that's not even something they think about."

He notes that an average ramp costs anywhere from \$5,000 to \$6,000, and while there are government programs that provide this service, the waiting list may be up to seven or eight years. Herr recounts building a ramp for the family of a young girl last year. "They're farmers. They don't have great insurance. They're good, hard-working people." He says, "Frankly, if you're ultra-poor the government takes care of it, if you're ultra-rich it's not a problem. I'm trying to help the average middle-class family."

Herr is impassioned as he speaks of the foundation, but stops to say, "Trust me, I'm not that special or great," claiming the families do the real work. "I mean, I go in, build a ramp for a couple weekends. Big deal. They're dealing with it every day."

Herr brings passion to his many pursuits, which include biking, skydiving, windsurfing and a fascination with old trucks. He says the only things he dislikes are crossword puzzles and playing cards—they require altogether "too much sitting." Speaking quickly and to the point, with an occasional colorful word, Herr peppers the conversation with surprising anecdotes. He comments, "I was a dumb jock," at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he studied construction management as an undergraduate.

It comes as no surprise that if Joe Herr is going to be a leprechaun, he is going to do it with a flourish. In an old tuxedo shirt, bowtie, knickers, hat and pointed ears, he enchants both young and old. Having first appeared in costume at a Halloween party (at which he won best costume), he dressed up for a half-way Hooley at Capital Brewery celebrating the six-month mark before St. Patrick's Day. He was spotted by members of Madison's Parade Committee. It was love at first sight.

In addition to appearing in the parade, Herr visited two schools, a nursing home and a children's hospital this year. "I had no idea St. Patrick's Day was this big a deal," says Herr, recalling the children jumping up and down when he appeared at St. Peter Catholic School in Ashton. He remembers one girl, a burn victim, who sat playing by herself at the hospital. Herr played with her and played his harmonica for her. "She smiled and that was worth it all right there."

Logan's Heart and Smiles is now in its third year. Of Logan's illness, Herr says he had peace that "it happened for a reason; I didn't know it was this reason." With a father's pride he describes how Logan's smile "always made people happy." He says he was "a great, fun, smiley kid," commenting, "the world needs another spoiled, bratty kid like a hole in the head." Less debatable is that the fact the world needs a few more of the making of Joe Herr.