

THE VILLAGE TRIP

A New Annual Festival Celebrating the History and Heritage of Greenwich Village

**Folk Music Workshops at the Little Red Schoolhouse & Elisabeth Irwin High School
Sunday, September 30, mid-morning (exact time TBC)**

Little Red Elisabeth Irwin High School has had many celebrated alumnae: black activist Angela Davis; actor Robert De Niro; Michael and Robert Meeropol, the children of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg; Elliott Abrahams, foreign policy advisor to Reagan and Bush; Victor Navasky, journalist, author and academic; and Mary Travers, singer and activist. Arthur Miller sent his kids there.

LREI as it is now known dates back to 1921, when Elisabeth Irwin was allowed to embark on her experiment in progressive education. A student of Sigmund Freud and John Dewey, both of whom emphasized the importance of a child's early years, Irwin was a well-known figure in Greenwich Village, a member of the Heterodoxy Club whose members, all women, questioned orthodoxy in culture, politics, economics and sexuality. Born in Brooklyn and a graduate of Smith College, she joined the Public Education Association, serving as a visiting teacher – effectively a social worker. The Association had emerged from the late 19th century good government movement and its first victory was to make education compulsory in New York State – a victory that further challenged the city's over-crowded schools system.

Irwin believed that “no child is a factory product” and in 1921, after directing a pilot project in an immigrant neighborhood on the Lower East Side, PS 64, she was allowed to move her experimental classes to the annex of PS 61, a red-brick building owned by the Children's Aid Society. Eleanor Roosevelt, not yet First Lady, was among Irwin's supporters. But New York City power brokers were always disapproving and used the Great Depression as an excuse to close the school down. Angry parents set up an HQ in a Village ice cream parlor, raised enough money to pay the staff and with support from Roosevelt and progressive educators across the country set out plans for the Little Red Schoolhouse to become a private institution, with tuition fees low enough that children from all races, religions and socio-economic classes could attend. The school opened in September 1932, the space for 150 children decorated by teachers and parents and their families. In 1941, Little Red High School welcomed its first student. It was renamed in 1942 following Irwin's death.

Irwin had wanted a place where “ideas can grow, where heresy will be looked upon as possible truth, and where prejudice will dwindle from lack of room to grow.” LREI's diverse range of teachers and students suggests she succeeded.

Folk music is part of the School's DNA. Composer and choral director Robert de Cormier, who often accompanied Paul Robeson, taught music at LREI before leaving to work with Harry Belafonte and Peter, Paul and Mary. Travers had been among his pupils though de Cormier said her musical success was "kind of a surprise." His predecessor was Norman Studer, who went to become director of the Downtown Community School on the Lower East Side, with which LREI was twinned. A folklorist, he hired the blacklisted Pete Seeger to teach singing, and Seeger would sometimes bring in his friend and fellow musician Woody Guthrie. In 1939 Studer founded Camp Woodland. His aim was to introduce city kids to old-time Catskill Mountains people and traditions and he put them to work collecting stories and songs. Seeger and his wife Toshi were Woodland regulars and their music-making there inspired Janis Ian, John Herald and Eric Weissberg among others.

LREI is a quintessential Greenwich Village school. Part of the establishment now of course, but founded by a woman who – like so many of her Village contemporaries – wanted to shake up what was then the establishment. And the School's musical life was anything but establishment: Earl Robinson, who wrote "The Ballad of Joe Hill," also taught there and Oscar Brand and Lead Belly visited regularly to perform. Robert Cohen was among those who heard them and he went on to found the New World Singers, sharing a stage with Bob Dylan before returning to teach at LREI. Eli Smith, musician and broadcaster and founder of the Brooklyn Folk Festival, is a more recent graduate.

As part of The Village Trip, a new festival celebrating the history, heritage and culture of Greenwich Village, a morning of folk music workshops will take place at LREI's Bleecker Street campus on the morning of Sunday, September 30. It will be led by folk musicians living and working in the Village today and children will have the chance to experiment on guitar, banjo and fiddle. The workshops will be followed by a short family concert featuring songs by Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Tom Paxton and others.

The Village Trip is a celebration of the history, heritage and culture of Greenwich Village. The inaugural festival will take place from September 27 - 30, 2018. More information: www.TheVillageTrip.com

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Partners:

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