Old Town School of Folk Music Executive Director Announces Retirement

Interim director appointed as board committee begins search process

CHICAGO — The Old Town School of Folk Music’s Executive Director James Bau Graves, 66, announced today that he is retiring from his post following 11 years of service and recent health issues that led to his decision to begin the new year focused on his health and a new chapter in his life.

Beginning January 3, Deputy Director Rashida Phillips will be Interim Executive Director for Old Town School. Board of Directors Chairman Kish Khemani said a board committee is set to begin a comprehensive process for search, selection and appointment of Old Town School’s next Executive Director. “It’s important this process is thorough, not rushed and to give ourselves time to consider input from the community of teachers, staff and students as we develop criteria for this selection.”

“We deeply appreciate Bau’s many contributions to Old Town School of Folk Music during his service. From successful fundraising for, and construction of, the Lincoln Square campus to his vision for Old Town School making a local and international impact, he brought music and dance to countless people whose lives have been enriched by our programs,” said Khemani. “We wish Bau well in his recovery to good health. We are grateful for his offer of continued support to help make this a smooth leadership transition.”

Graves was hospitalized in early November with serious blockages in three coronary arteries and has been on leave since that time. During his tenure, Old Town School secured the funds for the construction of its new East Building at 4545 N. Lincoln Ave. The new campus dramatically raised the school’s profile, garnering national praise and recognition. He often jokes that: “This is the only organization in the country with the words folk music in its name that has ever built such a sophisticated facility.”

While executive director, Graves emphasized international, cultural exchange and built a program at Old Town School that sent more than 100 of its teachers on paid performance and education exchanges with 10 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas, and created opportunities to bring even more global artists to Chicago for residencies at the School.

He advocated for providing the School’s programs beyond its facilities on the North Side and to serve communities throughout the city including on the South and West sides. This included performance programs like Iron Heart Chicago (60 concerts in one week on L platforms all over Chicago), or The 77 Beats (pop-up events featuring the unique music and cuisine of every Chicago neighborhood). Music Moves is an active arts & wellness partnership with a half dozen public health, social service and
community development organizations serving youth in Englewood with instruction in hip hop songwriting, electronic beat making and African drumming to inspire and train the next generation of arts activators to bridge the gap of inequality in arts & wellness programming on Chicago’s south and west sides.

“Throughout our history we’ve remained true to our philosophy that music and creative expression is for everyone. Musicians of all ages and abilities, from various cultures, traditions and walks of life come together to create music and learn from one another,” he said. “Yes, we teach the arts, and that is what brings us together. But equally important is our role in nurturing a sense of community. That is what our work is really about.”

Graves is a founding member and co-chair of Enrich Chicago, a consortium of arts organizations and foundations devoted to generating meaningful change in the patterns of systemic racism that predominate in the public arts arena. He also served as a long-time board member of Arts Alliance Illinois, and on numerous advisory and grant selection panels for the National Endowment for the Arts, the Illinois Arts Council Agency, DCASE, Chicago Community Trust, CMAP, and multiple foundations.

His article, “Why Public Culture Fails at Diversity,” was published last year in the Oxford Handbook of Community Music. “The Original Gig Economy,” is forthcoming in an anthology, The Futures of Work. Graves has continued to pursue sporadic performance opportunities, as a soloist, with classes he taught at the School, and as a part of the School’s annual caroling party, Songs of Good Cheer.

In a letter to staff, Graves reflected on his tenure as Executive Director saying “It has been my honor and great privilege to serve Old Town School and its extended community for 11 years. They have been, by far, the most challenging — and deeply rewarding — years of my professional life. Being director of Old Town School is a total immersion experience, and it was my good fortune to have been immersed in a collective that is the most warm, welcoming, creative and, to me, loving community that I have ever experienced.”

Annually Old Town School of Folk Music serves more than 13,000 students, sees 38,000 enrollments and welcomes in more than 189,000 attendees to its classes, lessons, camps, school partnerships, concerts, festivals, workshops and events. The next session of classes begins the week of January 7, 2019.

Chicago’s Old Town School of Folk Music is the largest community school of the arts in the U.S. and a non-profit organization committed to celebrating American music and global cultures. Founded in 1957, the Old Town School of Folk Music provides a wide range of music, dance, and arts courses to people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds. Whatever one’s interest, the Old Town School provides broad access to more than 700 accredited weekly class offerings, private lessons, and over 400 concerts and community events per year.

The Old Town School opened its Lincoln Square facility in 1998 and expanded in 2012. The Old Town School owns and operates three facilities situated in Lincoln Square and Lincoln Park that include 425-seat and two 150-seat concert halls, 64 classrooms, an award-winning music store, a cafe and resource center. Children’s classes are also held at several suburban satellite locations. More information is available at oldtownschool.org.

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