Jim Hirsch and the School’s revival.

“If the School had to hire a director now, they’d never hire someone like me,” says Jim Hirsch. A guitar instructor since 1972 and director of the School’s Evanston branch since 1979, Jim dropped out of Southern Illinois University before completing its first-ever degree in acoustic music. No fancy arts administration diploma, no non-profit management experience outside of the School. But he did have ideas for turning the School around, and he was fiercely committed to its survival.

“Jim Hirsch was the only one as far as I was concerned who met the criteria,” Kenton Morris (then board president) states flippantly. Perhaps because, as a 1982 Tribune article put it, “in four years of heading the school’s Evanston branch, he brought it out of the financial red into self-sufficiency.” Jim became director in May 1982. “I remember one day real clearly just sitting at my desk and feeling so overwhelmed by the hundreds of things that needed to be done instantly that I was almost incapable of doing anything,” he remembers, recalling how he pored over financial reports and slowly realized exactly what a mess the School was in. “The first year felt like it went on forever – we were putting in a lot of hours, and things were really tense.”

As a first step toward solvency, the board sold the 907 W. Armitage building to pay some debts and replenish operating funds. Then Jim started to work with the board to cut costs – by eliminating staff positions, dividing responsibilities among the remaining staff, and slashing operating expenses to the minimum.

“I didn’t draw a salary for the first month I was here,” Jim says. “And long-term plans? We couldn’t make any long-term plans. We were just trying to make payroll.”

Next step: bring in more money. The School had always received income through tuition and concerts, so Jim sought to increase class enrollment by offering specialty classes such as songwriting, harmonica, and children’s lessons – meanwhile reaching out to the musicians who had left the School during the crisis. Ewan McColl and Peggy Seeger’s 1982 sold-out performance got the concert series back on track. The School built up its music referral business, taking a percentage as an agent’s fee. And as he had done in Evanston, Jim rented out space in the School’s building. He also wanted to try something completely unknown to the School: organized corporate, foundation, and individual fundraising.

“Fundraising was probably one of the only areas where quick fixes like this organization needed were available,” Jim explains. Other staff members started to write proposals, and Jim took it over himself in early 1983. “It was hard,” he recalls. “You don’t just walk into people’s offices the first day and be successful, so we got turned down a number of times.” Board member Susan Church, a fundraising professional, guided Jim’s efforts, and “within a couple of years we went from raising $4,000-5,000 a year to raising over $100,000 a year.”

Can someone make the transition from musician to administrator? Michael Miles, now program director of the School, has a theory.

“Most everybody knew Jim for his guitar playing, for his being one of the finest finger-pickers in the Midwest. And what he was known for as a guitarist was his incredible precision… I would see him seated for hours on end at his typewriter, banging out letters of thanks and proposals. His office was piled with stuff – piles of music, piles of grant applications, cassette tapes, a couple of guitars, and his collection of miniature wind-up toys… I watched him alone in his office day after day, driven by the same sense of precision and an unparalleled devotion to the School as he fought for its survival and success. And all the while he set a tone for the School that helped make it a fun place and the ‘home of folk music’ that he wanted it to be.”

Renovation

The darkest financial days were past by 1985, but the School was faced with a 15,000-square foot problem. Good old Aldine Hall, 909 West Armitage, was crumbling.

“There finally came a point when we had to make a decision about the building,” explains former board president Harvey Dershin. “Not that we wanted to give up some of the features we had come to love, like the floors and ceiling that could be seen to vibrate when people danced or tapped their feet in unison, or the dungeon of a basement that no one ever entered except Igor, the dog, or the ‘elegant’ rest rooms, with leaky faucets and doors that wouldn’t close, or the radiators with valves that seemed to always be set at ‘drip,’ or the room temperatures that were always too hot in summer and too cold in winter. It was just that the City’s Building Department kept wanting us to fix things because of silly codes: things like the roof that leaked, the fire doors that weren’t fire doors, the parapets that were falling down, the electrical violations – things like that.”

Kenton Morris adds “The School was falling apart. One of the members of the board, Fritz Biederman, was an architect. We were having a board meeting and someone was talking about continuing the great success with the clog dancing on Friday night. Fritz turned white.”

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