Rebuilding the home of folk music:
The capital fund drive

When the School decided to renovate the building on Armitage, it also committed to its first major fundraising drive.

"Running a capital campaign was like having a second full-time job," sighs Jim Hirsch. Fortunately, the School hired a fundraising consultant, Tracey Shafroth, who was "very gifted at understanding all the different ways of finding money for a particular project might be," according to board member Susan Church.

The building committee realized it had to raise $525,000. "It was a little scary, considering that the School had almost gone out of business three years earlier," Jim says. Tracey, Jim, the board, staff, and an army of volunteers started pouring the pavement to raise money. Every dollar counted, so friends of the School were asked to throw a few bills in the hat passed at concerts, and foundations and government agencies were asked for major contributions.

Everyone at the School was delighted by the response. First, the School was one of only three folk organizations nationwide to receive a $75,000 challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Big grants came in from the Chicago-based Amoco Foundation, Borgh-Warner Foundation, the Dr. Scholl Foundation, the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, the Krege Foundation, and others. Board members pledged substantial amounts of money. "Over the next couple years the staff and the board worked and raised funds, and as happened so many times in the past people came forward with contributions of both time and money," Jim explains.

"Everybody really owned this project," Susan Church says, explaining how the staff and others got involved. "It was very much keeping with the spirit of the Old Town School, which is everybody owns the music, everybody owns the building, everybody owns the process of keeping it all going."

The highlight — and the most entertaining part — of the capital fund drive was a January 16, 1987 concert at Orchestra Hall. Old Town School friends John Prine, Bonnie Koloc, David Bromberg, Stephen Wade, Corky Siegel, and Fred Holstein played for free. Bonnie sang a number she had written for the audience. "With You on My Side," Stephen Wade performed his amazing "Chicago: The Best-Kempt Secret in America": "Two phone numbers I'll never forget as long as I live are that of my parents and that of Magikist carpet cleaners," he announced, and the audience joined him in singing "Hudson 3-7000." Win Stracke sang "Down by the Embraz," "Methodist Pie," and "Wee Drapey O,'" backed by Stude Tukel and Jim. Then the entire audience of 2600 people rose in tribute to Win, the founder of the School.

"It was a magical evening," says Jim Hirsch. "All of our friends came back. It was a real turning point for the School." The concert raised $400,000. By the time construction began in March 1987, the School had raised $650,000 — and the support and enthusiasm of thousands of contributors.

Through all those darkened days
With all my crazy ways
Feelin' just like a song
So few want to hear
And isn't it a sweet surprise
to turn around and find
that you are still on my side."

— Bonnie Koloc's song about the folk music audience, performed at the benefit concert in Orchestra Hall, Jan. 16, 1987

Friends of folk
Benefit brings alumni back to Old Town

Excerpted from an article by David Prescott, Chicago Tribune, January 16, 1987

When the Old Town School of Folk Music held its benefit concert Friday at Orchestra Hall, the evening's featured entertainers will have little trouble muster ing up enthusiasm for the cause.

In a move as appropriate as inviting a banjo player to an ice cream social, the venerable school has invited the cream of its alumni into the spotlight.

The list of performers includes John Prine, Stephen Wade, David Bromberg, Corky Siegel, and Bonnie Koloc. Their feelings about the school are as heartfelt as their music.

"I will never, ever stop being grateful to the Old Town School," says celebrated banjo player, singer and dancer Wade. "I have been both a student and a teacher at the school. I lived it. I learned so many important things..."

"I have always supported the school because in my mind it not only supports folk music, but local music as well," says Corky Siegel. "Back in 1965 when I first started playing music, my roommate was Ed Holstein, and he used to hang out at the Old Town School. I don't think it has changed at all since then. It still teaches love of music, and it motivates studying musicians to become local musicians."

"The school is in a place where music is available to anyone who is interested in learning to play, or even to listen," adds Bonnie Koloc. "I don't know of any place like it in the country, and I think it should be supported."

Ray Norland, president of WFMT Radio and a member of the school's board of directors, says revenues from the concert will cap the school's capital fund drive, which was initiated to raise $525,000 for improvements to the school at 900 W. Armitage Ave. Money raised during the campaign will be used to establish a folk museum, additional classroom space, and to improve the facility's concert room.

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Old Town School volunteers

"Why do people volunteer at the School? First of all, love of the music," explains Sue Kennell, who has donated her time "since we were singing hot dogs at the all-night parties back in the 1970's," she laughs. "Then you get hooked on the people and the place. You know you're part of something really special and important."

Volunteers have always been a vital part of the School — holding the place together, in fact, during the worst days of the early 1980's, when even teachers were asked if they would mind working for free to save the School from bankruptcy. Today, volunteers do everything from fundraising to organizing the Mr. Coffeehouse folk club to finding alternatives to the parking crunch in the School's neighborhood.

As volunteer coordinator Elaine Moore states, "The School couldn't survive without all the people who find time to help support it."

"The concert is a benefit to help support the Old Town School of Folk Music. But more than that, it is a celebration of what the school means to the people of Chicago, and to the people who have benefited from it."

— Corky Siegel

— Stephen Wade

Old Town School volunteers

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— Stephen Wade