

Irish Arts Center | NYC

Traditional Irish tunes and mariachi music were played at the wake of Elsa Armbruster Regan, who was neither Irish nor Mexican, but a woman who, in the last 30 years of her life, had found a community in the ceili band at Irish Arts Center, among people who play the type of music that bridges musicianship and kinship. As her large family commingled with the community she'd cultivated and brought into her life through IAC, the wake saw Elsa's memory honored not with silence, but with the exuberant and expressive music to which she devoted so much of her time.

Elsa had lived most of her life without ever playing in a band; it wasn't until she was in her 50s, out for a walk with her husband Jack in Central Park, that her life changed, and a new (and ultimately three-decades-long) path would open.

When Elsa and Jack stumbled upon the Irish Arts Center ceili band playing by the pond, Elsa's interest was piqued, and something "clicked immediately," as Jack describes. Elsa played the accordion, was most familiar with her own German musical heritage, and didn't have any specialized experience playing traditional Irish music. (Though being married to a first generation Irish American perhaps fueled her affinity for it.) Joining the band would prove to be a major leap into a huge new part of Elsa's life. A testament to the band's openness to anyone who wants to learn to play Irish tunes, regardless of background or past experience, with a community of other performers, Elsa would ultimately become the band's leader. As veteran band-member Sally Brennan (a tin whistle player who joined the band in the 1980s) described, Elsa was "the glue that held the band together."

Jack Regan suggests it may have been her "motherly instinct" (Elsa had six children and 12 grandchildren) that made her so equipped at holding the family of the band—including people who lived well outside New York City—together for so long. Her son, Russ, describes her as a "down-to-Earth, welcoming, beautiful person"—and perhaps the generosity and care she exuded, this idea that there was someone always thinking about the band and its members, sustained and propelled it for so many years.

"Because she was making so much of an effort you never wanted to disappoint her," says Brennan.

Her bandmates speak glowingly of Elsa's role as an organizer—both in finding time for everyone's schedules (and chasing people who didn't use email down with encouraging phone calls), but also as an organizer of tunes. She filled the programs with tunes that exhibited the exciting variation in traditional Irish music—there were jigs, reels, hornpipes, waltzes, polkas, slides—and connected it with that of other cultures.

She was known for her meticulousness when it came to navigating the temporal relationship between the music and accompanying set-dancing, ensuring the dances and tunes were impeccably matched. Elsa was the driving force behind putting together a studio recording of the band, and had planned to gather everyone for a second CD in the near future. Not only did she oversee the band's presence at events across the city—from the annual NYC Irish Dance

Festival in Riverside Park to IAC's beloved St. Patrick's Open Day—Elsa also brought the band into various nursing homes, an exchange band-members particularly cherished.

The parties she threw bi-annually (in winter at her and her husband's home on the Upper West Side, and in summer at their Upper Greenwood Lake home) helped reinforce the closeness bandmates felt—and, as everyone would end up playing in impromptu sessions, helped create a level of total comfort playing with one another. “It became a very close circle of friends,” says Jack. “It was a nice social life, grounded in mutual respect; it filled up so much of Elsa's time and was very important to her.”

As Brennan describes, Elsa upheld the band's legacy of openness to “a variety of people with a variety of ages sharing the common bond of the music, and letting it bring all the walls down.” In the ceili band, she says, “it doesn't matter if you're young or old, Irish or not Irish, none of that matters.”

James Cleveland, a fiddle player and the band's “de facto” lead musician, says, “Elsa didn't grow up with Irish music or Irish heritage. But one thing that's wonderful about Irish music in general is that it's really a community activity, and in order to appreciate Irish music, you just have to play it. To love Irish music is to play it or become involved with it.” Ever since that one serendipitous day walking in Central Park, Elsa's involvement was unwavering.

When Elsa fell ill and could no longer attend practices, Russ would visit and play music with her. “She loved music, so most members of the family also play instruments,” he says. “Any time we'd have a family gathering she'd want people to bring their instruments and play. When she was sick, she would still want to practice her tunes and I would play along on the guitar and she would play accordion. It's something I always enjoyed and was able to share with her, and I learned the tunes through her.”

Says Brennan, “I don't know what we're going to do without her. I can't imagine that any of us will have the energy to accomplish all she did. We were very blessed to have Elsa in our lives as the driving force behind our IAC band. She will be missed by all whose lives she touched.”

—*Moze Halperin*