

Sweet Haven of Mercy: Laurie Lewis Brings Bluegrass to the Columbia Gorge

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### **The Road to Menucha**

The morning of April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2018 saw the sun rise in a clear blue sky over Portland, Oregon. It was an anomaly in a spring locale typically shrouded in gray and rain. As my husband and I packed and prepared for our trip up the Columbia Gorge, we felt a heightening sense of excitement at the great weather and the experiences in store for us at Laurie Lewis's inaugural Bluegrass in the Gorge camp. We had both heard great things about the Menucha Retreat and Conference Center, though neither of us had been. The camp was to feature small group instruction by Laurie and friends on our instruments, singing, and songwriting. I was looking forward to improving my banjo chops with Justin Hiltner, and my husband, who had just begun playing mandolin two months prior, was unsure whether he'd be able to attend any of the workshops with Tom Rozum, as he was worried about slowing up the group as a bluegrass newbie. By that afternoon, every last detail of packing and cat-sitting was attended to, and we headed off into the Gorge.

### **A Peaceful Place**

As Scott drove and I navigated us off the main road onto the hilly, wooded entrance to the Menucha grounds, I couldn't help but feel I was entering a different world. This is a lush place with a feel of magic about it, and a kind of ineffable peace is pervasive. As we arrived at the main lodge building, Program Director Reverend Lori Nance was there to help us get settled in our cute and cozy room, and made herself available if we needed anything. A chipmunk watched us unload our instruments and bags from the car.

Said Lori,

“Retreat planning is a process involving dreaming, decision-making, creativity, organization and improvisation. It is fun seeing something go from idea to reality. I get to work with some amazingly talented and fascinating people to put together events that are both fun and enrich people's lives. Most often we find groups to work with through people who have been to Menucha who say 'You know, you ought to talk to \_\_\_\_.' Bluegrass in the Gorge is a great example of how that happens. I was talking one day to Mary Flower, who is Artistic Director for our Blues in the Gorge (acoustic blues guitar camp) telling her we were thinking of starting a bluegrass event. I asked Mary if she knew of anyone. Before I knew it, emails were flying, and I was on the phone with Laurie Lewis, then we were picking dates and away we went!”

Scott and I were assigned to “The Hideaway,” a very private room down three flights of rustic stone steps. Though lugging my heavy Stelling banjo up and down those stairs all week proved to be a workout, it is a perfect room assignment for those who prefer their privacy. The room was neat as a pin-- though the furnishings were not new, they were comfortable and homey, and there were plenty of books and games, as well as a coffee maker, kitchenette, and tea service. Resting a moment on the deck, which looked out westward with a view of the Columbia River, I felt a kind of sanctity that would stay with me through the remainder of the camp. A woman who came to bring us some fresh towels remarked that it often feels like the many prayers said in this place have settled into the land. As we settled into the room, we could hear a mandolin and singing faintly in the distance, adding to the great sense of peace and stillness in the tall trees and indigenous wildlife surrounding us.

Heading back up to the main building for a walking tour of the grounds, we were joined by Lori Nance, Marketing Director Lauren Deming, and several other camp participants. The grounds are expansive

and feature two iconic Gorge views. We learned that Menucha was built in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by former Oregon governor and department store magnate Julius Meier as a summer home for his large family, and had been acquired by the Presbyterian Ministry in the 1950s. Many traces of the Meier family remain, such as a pair of huge J and M shaped andirons inside a prodigious outdoor stone fireplace, where one can imagine the cookouts of a large family of times long-gone.

Lauren Deming said that “Julius and Grace Meier named this estate Menucha (the Hebrew word for still waters/renewing stillness) and used it for getting away with family and for entertaining on a large scale. Their 1,200 square foot living room has a wrap-around balcony and a huge stone fireplace. The home was constructed during that great social experiment known as Prohibition so Mr. Meier hid a speakeasy in the basement. When he pushed a little button tucked under the fireplace mantel, motors in the floor would open two doors in the wall, revealing a fancy built-in bar ornamented with carved wood and stained glass. Another architectural oddity is the little window cut through his bathroom medicine cabinet which allowed him to keep an eye on things happening in the living room.”

Today, the speakeasy space is home to a delightful coffee shop which is open daily after breakfast and lunch. Crown Point and Vista House are visible from the eastward view near the swimming pool, and as we gazed out into the perfect afternoon, Lauren described what it had been like during the Eagle Creek Fire, looking out and seeing the fire creep closer and closer, hoping it would not reach Menucha. Luckily, it didn't and the grounds remained intact.

Said Lauren,

“Firefighters put out spot fires at Crown Point, just 2 miles up the road from us. Then the wind died down and the fire stopped moving westward, much to our relief. Menucha was in the area that remained under mandatory evacuation for 12 days which forced us to cancel 20 groups for September, resulting in a \$50,000 loss. Still, that's small potatoes compared to what replacing this historic property would have cost. The bottom line is that we were burned financially but not physically...and we were very grateful.”

Walking back across the grounds, we passed over a large in-ground stone labyrinth. The labyrinth, said Lauren, “was built with all volunteer labor in 2008 under the leadership of landscape architect George Erdenberger. Its design is very similar to the one found inside Chartres Cathedral in France. The center piece mosaic rosette was created by local art students of the Hera Community School under the direction of artist Anna Meyrick”

The delicious meals at Menucha were served family style. Group members volunteered to assist with serving at each meal. This helped with the feeling of home and family, and lent a sense of humility to the occasion. The dining room looks out over the breathtaking westward Gorge view. Laughter, joviality, and good conversation were the norm in the dining hall, as group members got to know each other better. Meals are prepared on site, and the fresh bread baked daily could be a meal in itself.

## **Camp Impressions**

Menucha was a great setting for focusing in and learning about my instrument. The camp was set up with a lot of flexibility for jumping between instrument tracks. I chose to attend all six banjo workshops with instructor Justin Hiltner while other participants were taking guitar and singing workshops with Laurie, mandolin with Tom Rozum, and fiddle with Brandon Godman. The groups I attended were casual, with topics ranging from moving sixth chords, to songwriting, to improvisational ideas and techniques. Justin taught in a lighthearted manner while still transmitting a large amount of

knowledge. He said of the workshops,

“It was a great opportunity for me to flex my teaching muscles again. I hadn't taught in a little while, so I appreciated the chance to think through a few new course ideas and rework some of my more traditional topics. The students gave me great feedback and I think we all learned together over the week, which is the goal!”

Overall, the combination of courses led to me having a real “a-ha” moment with my instrument on day three. I found it helpful that there was at least a one-hour break between most of the banjo workshops, affording me time to go back to the room with my instrument to internalize the lesson. It was the right number and frequency of workshops to dig in and gain a bunch of real knowledge.

Said Brandon,

“I enjoyed the workshops quite a bit, especially with them all having a different topic of focus. I feel that opens it up to let students pick and choose what they attend, while allowing the instructors to offer something for everyone. The common difficulty with camps is the difference in experience and level of playing. I hate isolating folks in any way. I think the fiddle/banjo and my 'make that tune your own' courses were my favorite and most fun to teach.”

It just wouldn't be a bluegrass camp without jamming, and the first evening of camp featured instructor-led jams. The instructors were inclusive and welcoming, and seemed to have a magical ability to elevate everyone's playing. I felt relaxed, and found myself getting outside my comfort zone with my banjo breaks and trying stuff up the neck that I might not have attempted before. Sometimes it worked out, sometimes not, but overall I got the sense it was a safe place to try new things.

Said camp participant Donna Dunaif,

“I had been really looking forward to meeting and having classes with both Brandon Godman and Justin Hiltner, because I play both fiddle and banjo. Getting to meet and interact with them was my favorite experience at camp. I was very satisfied with their classes, as well.”

Participant Molly Westmoreland, who primarily attended guitar and singing workshops with Laurie, said,

“What I loved most about this weekend at Menucha was the personal touch everyone received from Laurie and her friends. In the rhythm guitar workshops, Laurie offered useful tips to each individual player tailored to their skill level. I know I came home with a few gems! I also loved that she stressed the importance of a rhythm guitar player, whether or not they had interest in learning to play leads. And the harmony workshop where we all learned to sing A Beautiful Life was such a great way to top off a wonderful few days of Bluegrass in the Gorge!”

Another highlight of camp was the second evening's program of “bluegrass karaoke,” where Laurie, Tom, Justin, and Brandon backed folks up on a song selection. Many people chose to take the opportunity, and it made for a very entertaining evening. Laurie and the band helped everyone sound great. When my turn came, I chose “High on the Mountain” by Ola Belle Reed, a song I know well and had performed before. It was so fun performing with them, and they brought out the best in anyone brave enough to give it a go. The following evening was an open mic night, with emceeing by Justin and Brandon, who said he “learned that emceeing open mic can be fun!”

Said camp participant Elliott Picciotto,

“I went to Menucha to see Laurie and Tom and was happy to listen to stories and learn a few things.

Both are warm, friendly, inclusive people who have made a study of bluegrass music for all of their adult lives. I try to see them when they come this way and am never disappointed. Their music, their detailed understanding of it and their ability to share with others are simply top notch. As someone who likes to sing, I was especially happy that I went.”

Participant Anna Berry added that,

“After many years of admiring Laurie Lewis and Tom Rozum, I was so excited to have a chance to learn from them. I was not disappointed. They filled our days with wonderful music and vast knowledge of the bluegrass genre. I came away inspired and excited for the next opportunity to work with them!”

Overall, the peaceful setting as well as the welcoming, inclusive instruction was conducive to progress on our instruments. Scott did end up getting the opportunity to go to the mandolin workshops after all, and I could hear a marked difference in his picking by the time camp was over. Overall there was a great sense of camaraderie and collaboration between camp participants, and it seemed that old friendships were strengthened and new ones were forged. Tom Rozum said of the mandolin workshops,

“My goal as an instructor was to first assess the students’ abilities and levels, and then to find ways to impart knowledge that I’ve garnered over the many years of learning, playing and performing. It’s always rewarding to be able to point out the problem areas of a student’s playing that may be holding them back, and how they can be eliminated. My workshops are always tailored to the needs of the group. This year at Menucha, we spent much of the time trying to demystifying and familiarizing ourselves with the mandolin fingerboard.”

### **Laurie's Take**

The Bluegrass Express was able to catch up with Laurie Lewis by email after the event, and she shared her thoughts regarding Menucha and the direction this music is headed.

BE: In the past, you put on a long-running bluegrass camp here in Oregon called Bluegrass at the Beach. What is similar between that and the new event at Menucha, Bluegrass in the Gorge? What is different?

LL: One difference is that I purposely tried to keep more open time in the schedule at Menucha. At Bluegrass at the Beach, the instructors and the students worked overtime, trying to cram as much into each day as possible. I found that everyone stops learning at a certain point, and just drags themselves through the days, thinking that they will ingest the information when they get back home. That rarely happens. So I set out to design a camp with stand-alone classes, so that attendees can follow their interests and jump around from subject to subject. And there is more time built into the day to actually work on and further explore what they have learned. An added benefit is, I think, that attendees at all levels of experience can usually find something within each hour to challenge them in some way.

BE: What made you decide now is the time to begin a new bluegrass camp in the Pacific Northwest?

LL: I hadn’t thought about having a bluegrass camp again until I was approached by Menucha to do it. Reports on the place were so universally positive, the staff is so helpful, and I am a sucker for beauty. It made me feel like I could take on another camp. And then, I realized how much I had missed the Pacific Northwest and the camaraderie of Bluegrass at the Beach. I feel like we can recapture some of that magic.

BE: What was it like planning the camp?

LL: Luckily for me, I chose teachers who are a joy to work with. I sent out an email with my idea of having free-standing classes, and Brandon, Tom and Justin jumped on board and came up with great suggestions. Then all I had to do was figure out a schedule and come up with ideas for my own classes.

BE: What were some of your hopes and goals for this event?

LL: The main hope and goal for a camp like this is to help build and nurture a musical community. And, of course, to have fun in a beautiful setting!

BE: In what ways did the camp meet or exceed your expectations, and what are focus areas for improvement next time?

LL: I think the facilities were outstanding. They exceeded my expectations. As did the food. Having a bassist next year would improve things, and maybe a designated group jam. Though I have to say, I find the big group jams tend to not be very fulfilling musical experiences. Maybe smaller jams with a designated facilitator.

BE: You've helped many musicians get a start during your career, and many might consider you a change agent. How do you view your role within the bluegrass community, and has this shifted over time?

LL: I suppose that my role has shifted over time. It used to be, I was just trying to get a gig, and play and sing as well as I could. These days, I am more interested in the power of music to communicate, both with fellow musicians and with the audience. I feel that, by dint of longevity if nothing else, I have learned a lot about music and more than I care to know about the business of music. I enjoy sharing, if it can help someone else achieve a deeper connection with themselves and those around them.

BE: How has bluegrass music itself changed? Do you think the music is currently on the rise or the decline?

LL: I have seen bluegrass go through many surges of popularity over the years, usually when it is featured on the soundtrack of a popular movie (Bonnie and Clyde; Deliverance; O Brother, Where Art Thou?). It is definitely more accepted/acceptable, in that more people even know what it is, than it was in the early 1970's when I first started playing, but I feel that probably at its best it is a niche music. I kind-of like it that way. I don't think it translates well to an arena setting.

BE: What is the best way to attract a new bluegrass audience? How can current fans and artists help promote diversity, and why is this so important?

LL: The reason I think diversity is so important is that we get to hear from different viewpoints. I find bluegrass music such a wonderful form for personal self-expression, and if the only thing available in the genre is the Southern White Man perspective, then only Southern white men will be able to identify. As a Westerner and a woman, I bring my own unique perspective to the listening audience through the

music. I want to hear what others have to say. As for how to attract a new audience, I really don't know. My own audience is aging along with me. I don't think I'm the right person to answer that question.

BE: What is the best piece of musical advice you could give to someone starting down the bluegrass road?

LL: Follow your own muse. Don't try to fit yourself in the box of bluegrass (or any other type of music) if it's not a comfortable fit. Be yourself, and work on your taste, tone and timing. Hot licks are fine, but without a solid grounding of the Three T's, they are just so much noise.

### **A Winding Path**

On the camp's second-to-last afternoon, Scott and I ended up walking the labyrinth. It wasn't even something we agreed to do verbally, it just kind of happened. No one else was around, and we wandered there and began, not knowing what it would be like or how long it would take. Like most things, looking at it from the outside isn't anything like being in it. Though we were only a few steps away from each other, it's very much a solitary journey. A labyrinth isn't a maze, but more of a walking meditation with only one path to the center and back. As I walked, I thought about how it represented life... no matter how close you are with someone, you're always on your own solitary journey.

When we reached the center, there were two options: return the way we had come, or exit the meditation by merely exiting the circle. We chose the former, and as we retraced our steps, I thought more about life-- how the second half of life in a way can be a mirror of the first, but because you are a different person by that stage, the experience is something totally new and different. All in all, the walking meditation took about 25 minutes, and I came away with a deep sense of peace.

As Lori Nance said,

"I hope that events at Menucha will be equal parts refreshing, challenging and energizing. If Menucha feels like a stranger at the beginning of an event, by the time people leave, I hope it will feel more like a friend who has opened their doors wide, fed you well and invites you to come back. I want people to leave wanting to come back for more, having felt welcomed, fed in body and spirit, and encouraged to grow in the skills they came here to practice. I hope our programs encourage people to be their best selves not only here, but at home in their usual places."

That overall sense of inspiration stayed with me the following day as we exited the property. I came away from the experience with a better sense of serenity and community than I had when I got there. The picturesque setting and helpful, informative staff made Menucha a wonderful retreat from the bustle of daily life. The great musical instruction and enthusiastic students made Bluegrass in the Gorge a one-of-a-kind chance for hands-on learning with Laurie Lewis and her friends.