

THE ELEANOR AND ANNA ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

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Description: In this segment, ER discusses adult education with Mary Urban, an official with the New School for Social Research.

Participants: ER, Mary Urban

[ER:] Thank you, Anna. I think the question of adult education is deserving of more attention than it usually receives, so I have asked Mrs. Joseph Urban to visit us today for a discussion of the subject. I'm happy to introduce Mary Urban for two reasons, because she can tell us a great deal about the subject of adult education and because she's a charming person who habitually shuns the limelight while encouraging others. Mrs. Urban was the wife of the celebrated architect and stage designer Joseph Urban, some of whose stage sets are still being used by the Metropolitan Opera. Both Mr. and Mrs. Urban were connected with New York's New School for Social Research from its beginning, and it was Urban who designed and built the school, one of the first modern buildings in Manhattan. Mrs. Urban has long been an official of the school. So first of all, will you tell us what the school does and introduce it to some of our listeners who may not know about it, Mrs. Urban?

[Mary Urban:] Thank you, Mrs. Roosevelt. The present New School building has become so much a part of our thinking today that it is hard to recall the hubbub raised in 1931 by its modernist façade and its bold use of color in its classrooms. Alvin Johnson wrote of the architecture, "It is straightforward, rational, and unafraid, and such is the spirit of the New School." I remember in 1919 when the New School was founded there was great excitement when Charles Beard and James Harvey Robinson left Columbia to found, with others, a school for adults. A school based on intelligent thinking and intellectual honesty--considered very radical in those times. And among that early group were--were remarkable men such as Thorstein Veblen, Wesley Mitchell, Horace Kallen, John Dewey, Graham Wells, and many others. It was after the First World War, in a time of great economic confusion, and the obvious need for such an institution was apparent, a place which would assist the intelligent adult toward educating himself. Our world then knew little about world affairs or world civilization. We knew little, we cared less. The founders of the New School realized this and set about to create an educational institution, built on the premise that democracy cannot be adequately defended by high school graduates, by BAs, or even PhDs, but by citizens informed and intellectually awake to the central issues of the day.

[ER:] Apparently there are many who feel the New School succeeds very well in its endeavors. I understand you are about to outgrow that fine building your husband designed, and that your enrollment is greater than it has ever been.

[Mary Urban:] Oh well it looks so. In the beginning the New School was housed in one building on West Twenty-Third Street, and later it spread out to occupy six houses. But in 1931 Mr. Urban designed the new building which presently houses the New School on Twelfth Street. This was the design for about two thousand. Today we are close to eight thousand students, quite cramped in every possible space in the school as well as in the neighboring office building. In fact the school has been described as the university with a sidewalk campus.

[ER:] [ER laughs] Of course you have a wonderful drawing card in your faculty Mrs. Urban. Will you tell us about some courses and the men and women who teach them?

[Mary Urban:] I think our president, Dr. [Bryn] Hovde is very happy about his faculty. In selecting members, the New School has been guided by only one criterion: intellectual competence. As a result the school has obtained an international reputation for the eminence of its faculty. When the Nazis wrecked the great universities in Europe, the school rescued 178 of the leading professors. But academic eminence is not the only qualification for a lecturer at the New School. Anyone who has something valid to say is welcome. Business leaders and engineers, practical men, writers, labor union representatives, with or without academic laurels have given courses, led meetings, and conducted forums. Eighty-four percent of those who teach are visiting specialists, and only sixteen regular faculty members.

[ER:] That's very interesting. To what kind of people would you say the school appeals? And from what groups do your students come?

[Mary Urban:] Well actually there's no pattern or neat description to classify the student body. While over half the students hold college or professional degrees, a little over 30 percent neither went to college or were able to complete their college courses. And the average range is from eighteen to eighty. The students are judges, financiers, doctors, psychologists, office workers, clergymen, and librarians. And it's interesting, only six hundred out of the eight thousand are studying for degrees. Most of the students are drawn to the school seeking an understanding and a fuller knowledge of our times and cultures. And it's also interesting that out of a million dollar budget, over eight hundred thousand is paid by students in tuition so I believe they must be satisfied.

[ER:] Well I should say that what you told us is evidence of the need for such an institution in the community. I think other communities too would welcome a center where grown men and women can meet to continue their education and expand their interests under the guidance of skilled teachers. What plans do you have for the future?

[Mary Urban:] Well I think we like best the role of trailblazer. We've pioneered in many fields-- among them mental hygiene, psychoanalysis, housing, and labor relations. And at present we are pioneering for the young mother who will get a babysitter in the daytime hours and who wants to come to school, the housewife who never thought much before of continuing her education, and women of leisure who are seeing their responsibility for the first time. I believe in a larger building we might even be self-supporting, which would be a fulfillment of the original dream of our founders. And Mrs. Roosevelt, have I time to read a letter from your husband to us on the anniversary of our twenty-fifth year?

[ER:] Surely.

[Mary Urban:] "My hearty congratulations to you, and through you Mr. [possibly chairman of the board Louis] Weiss, to all friends of the New School for Social Research on the twenty-fifth anniversary of its founding. I'm glad, too, that after twenty-five years of outstanding work you still cling to the original name New School. It shows that the school maintains an atmosphere of youth and vitality in an ever-changing world. That is particularly important in the field of education." We're very proud of that letter Mrs. Roosevelt.

[ER:] Thank you very much Mrs. Urban for coming to be with us today. And now back to my daughter Anna in Hollywood.

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