

## ARCHITECTURE, YIDDISH THEATER & LINGUISTICS: PORTRAIT OF ELISA STEINBERG

Article and photography by Brent Hoffmann, Class of 2005

Elisa Steinberg, Class of 2007, has a combination of talents that's unique even among our eclectic corps of CAF docents. She acted in the Yiddish theater, was educated in architecture, and studied linguistics at The University of Chicago. Oh, she is a native Spanish speaker, too.

She's originally from Uruguay, where her Jewish parents emigrated from Poland in the 1920s. "We spoke Yiddish at home," Elisa says. "From the ages of 3 to 28 I acted in the Yiddish theater ensemble in Montevideo, the capital of the country. When I was a child, I played the role of one of the daughters in *Tevey the Milkman*. (The play, a drama by Sholem Aleichem, was later adapted as a musical that premiered on Broadway in 1964 as *Fiddler on the Roof*.)

In the mid-1970s Elisa studied architecture at the University of the Republic-Uruguay. She then worked for an architectural firm, first in Montevideo, then later in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

In 1976 Elisa and her husband, Manuel Diaz, fled Uruguay following the nation's military coup and rule that lasted until 1984. "We lost our house and most of our possessions, but the worst was losing my architecture portfolio," says Elisa. They relocated to New Haven, Connecticut, in 1978, when Manuel was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for research in molecular and cellular biology at Yale University.

### Dearborn Park

Elisa came to Chicago in 1982, when Manuel accepted an appointment as an assistant professor at the University of Chicago. They lived in Hyde Park for 19 years, and then moved to the Dearborn Park neighborhood, south of the Loop, in 2001.

Elisa became a docent in 2007. "I studied architecture in Uruguay but wasn't able to transfer my credits for lack of documentation," she says. "In Chicago, I worked towards a Ph.D. in linguistics at The University of Chicago, while teaching Spanish. I was encouraged to enter the CAF program because I so admired the tours of a German friend who leads Frank Lloyd Wright tours in Oak Park."

She's certified for the Historic, Rise of the Skyscraper, Chicago Old and New tours; FLW by Bus and private tours; and is certifying for the Hyde Park tour. "I like doing the monthly combination of Historic and Modern, plus Chicago Old and New tours -- in Spanish."

### Docent Style

"My tours are a mix of architecture, Yiddish theater, and linguistics," she says.

In 2010 Elisa developed the Spanish-language tours for CAF. "For these tours, most of my tourees are from Latin America and Spain, not the U.S.," she explains. "They'll say, 'I like your tours because they're not memorized. And please tell us as much as you can, because this is my first and possibly only time in Chicago.' I have to remember to adapt the tours to the culture of the tourees, and also my own: never-ever expect to start on time, keep a more relaxed pace, and remember to 'have fun while teaching'. At the request of the Spanish visitors, we'll sometimes run a little over two hours so we can stop for coffee, and talk more about the city. They're thrilled, too, because they can enter buildings -- like the Rookery and others -- that they don't know are open to the public."

For CAF members, she helped develop a three-hour, bus-and-walking tour, Pilsen Past, Present and Future.

### Lecturer at U.C.

Elisa was a lecturer in Spanish and linguistics at the University of Chicago, as well as a professor at Chicago State University and at the Purdue University-Calumet branch in Hammond, Indiana. "I'm now retired from teaching," she says, "but I still do occasional presentations in Yiddish. For example, at the Evanston Public Library I read from the original *Tevey the Milkman* for a talk by Jan Lisa Huttner, who's writing a book on *Fiddler on the Roof*."

Elisa and Manuel make annual trips to Uruguay to visit their son Gaston. Their daughter Flora lives in New York.

[<< See more articles from this Docent Quarterly](#)

[http://www.architecture.org/doc\\_quarterly1310\\_profile\\_steinberg](http://www.architecture.org/doc_quarterly1310_profile_steinberg)



**Elisa leads a  
Chicago Old and New tour**



**Elisa introduces Cloudgate on her  
Chicago Old and New tour.**



**As seen in The Bean: Elisa (right) leads  
her tourees through Millennium Park**