

# IN THEIR OWN WORDS

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## STUDY GROUPS

*The Incredible Engine of the IRP*

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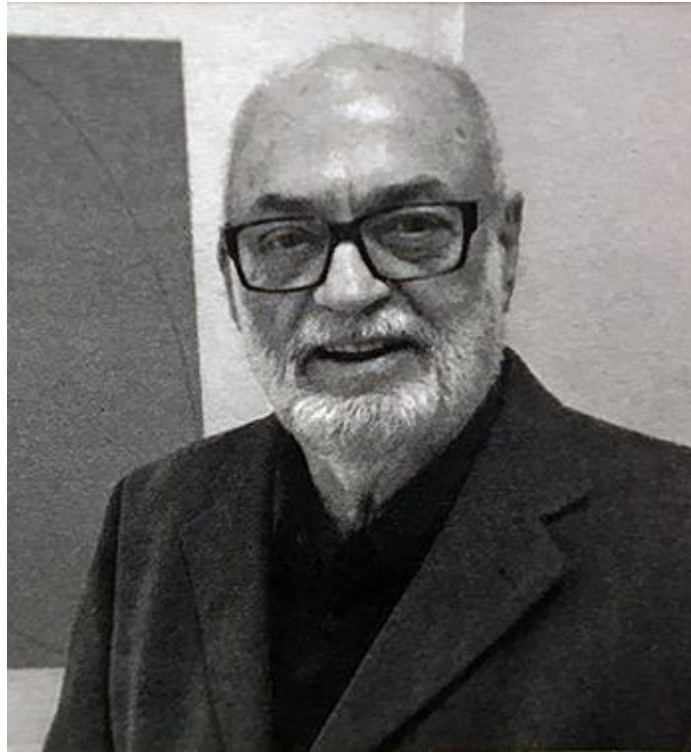
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**INSTITUTE FOR RETIRED  
PROFESSIONALS**

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION TO MICHAEL MARKOWITZ .....	2
INTERVIEW WITH JUDITH FRIED .....	3-5
JAN ADLER .....	6
JOHN BECKER .....	7-8
EILEEN BRENER .....	9
JANE CASE EINBENDER .....	10
CAROL GRONEMAN .....	11
BARBARA MARWELL .....	12
CAROL MILLSOM .....	13
ARLETTE SANDERS .....	14
KEN WITTY .....	15-16

## **DEDICATED TO DIRECTOR MICHAEL MARKOWITZ (1936-2019)**



The IRP, founded in 1962, has long been regarded as the premier peer learning organization in the country. This entity became defined and finely tuned with the arrival of Michael Markowitz as our director. It was Michael who created the rigorous program under which we function to this day. More than thirty new study groups per semester plus an active summer program have been the hallmark of our school.

All IRP members are encouraged to coordinate courses. Many members choose subjects in which we have held varying degrees of expertise from prior careers. However, many more choose subjects in which they have long held interests. All members of a study group are active in class but it is the coordinators who captain this team effort.

Study groups are the heart and soul of the IRP. What follows are the processes, thoughts and experiences of several members whose enormous efforts have made our success a reality. Preceding their words is an interview with retired member Judith Fried who coordinated forty-five study groups, served as Board President, was editor of *Voices* and worked closely with Michael for over two decades.

We dedicate this publication to Michael whose vision and direction we continue to hold and for which hundreds of us are grateful and enriched.

## A HISTORY OF THE IRP — AN INTERVIEW WITH JUDITH FRIED

By Carmen Mason - March, 2019



The Institute for Retired Professionals was founded in 1962. It took many years for it to evolve into the eclectic, broad-reaching center of learning and camaraderie it has become today.

Several months ago I had the pleasure of interviewing Judith Fried who had moved from California to New York in late 1981 after working with blind and psychiatric hospital court-ordered patients and teaching at Immaculate Heart College and Loyola University. After nursing her dying mother and volunteering for the peace movement and then the NARAL (Pro-Choice America) she realized, “I wanted more! I wanted something just for myself. I did feel somewhat guilty but it was time.” Hunting through The New School catalogue Judith “came upon the IRP and voila!” She joined in 1993 and retired from the IRP in 2014.

Throughout my interview, Judith exclaimed how grateful she was for the diverse and vital importance the IRP played in her life to this very day. I was so taken by her excited response to my first question asking what the IRP meant to her: “I loved it. I still have all my files of the workshops I took and those I coordinated or co-coordinated. I loved the learning, the facilitating and being an active participant, researching, reading, going on the internet. And the friendships! It all filled my life.”

Through the years Judith Fried not only was an editor of *Voices*, a member of the admissions and curriculum committees and Board President from 1998-2002 but coordinated and co-coordinated 45 study groups – her first, *The Fifties*, in 1996, and her final one, *Seamus Heaney*, in 2014. Just a few of her many were *The Beats*, *The Black Mountain Poets*, *Poetry in Translation*, *Irish Poetry from The 6<sup>th</sup> Century*, *Emily Dickinson*, *Czesław Milosz and Wislawa Szymborska*, *W.H. Auden*, *T.S. Eliot*, *Elizabeth Bishop*, *Derek Walcott*, *War Poems*, *Walt Whitman*, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Women Poets*, and *W.S. Merwin*, to name but 17. Having enjoyed facilitating all her study groups, her poetry groups were her greatest pleasure. She felt that “being a coordinator is the rare gift IRP offers its members.”

During our afternoon I learned a lot about the fascinating evolution of the IRP and its transformed character many might not be aware of. The IRP started in 1962 but didn’t take on its present day design until the early

90's. Judith reminded me of several members still attending today from 1992 and 1993 – Mimi Weissblum, Maureen Sullivan, Norma Grossman, Florence Horenstein, and Liz Hubig. She informed me that Michael Markowitz, who had been The New School's Director of Personnel since 1975, had been asked by Jonathon Fanton to replace the outgoing IRP director, Henry Lipman. He accepted. The first director was the IRP's Hy Hirsch, "who really created IRP" Judith said.

Judith vividly recalled that in the early years "the IRP did not in any way resemble the one you are in now. There were no semesters; classes were held on alternate weeks from September to June. There was no need to commit to a class attendance, and members were not discouraged from dropping in on classes such as 'News and Views' and 'Making the Best of Our Years.'" Often other study groups had various reports given without leaving enough time for questions and discussions, although she does remember some wonderful study groups given by Harriet Rosenbaum, particularly one on Emily Dickinson.

Judith recounted, "But that Fall of 1993, Jonathan Fanton, President of what was still The New School for Social Research, told Michael Markowitz the IRP must conform to New School expectations – academic excellence, regular semesters, regular class enrollment, and attendance maintained." She is sure that some IRP members today still might "remember or have heard about the chaos that followed – and it sure was chaos. When the membership learned of the required changes, rebellion ensued! Few of the IRP leaders thought the University had any right to tell the IRP how it should operate – and ...there was some stormy public fighting during which Michael was called names I shan't repeat." At the end of the Fall semester of 1994, 150 members decamped believing that without them, the IRP would cease to be.

But Judith happily continued: "Of course that did not happen. After the discontented departed, Fanton asked us not to admit any new members for one semester so that he could see we really would adopt both The New School Calendar and class standards. Then, happily, on October 17, 1995, President Fanton came to the IRP General Meeting, gave opening remarks, and reassured us that we still had a home on 12<sup>th</sup> Street.

"In 1996, Ira Weinblatt joined the IRP and in 1997 became Board President. Many men now in the IRP might know something about Ira. Soon after he joined he noticed that men more often dropped out while women did not. That, he said, is because women just naturally get together and talk, so we should have a men's group and every man who joins the IRP will be invited. I confess I often wondered what they talked about, because men were no longer dropping out – but their privacy was kept and that privacy still continues today.

“When Ira Weinblatt became Board President he asked me to be his VP because he figured I’d been in the IRP a while longer than he and probably knew what was going on. Nice of him – not exactly accurate. Early in his tenure an awful thing happened – Ira was killed in a bicycle accident. We were all shocked and dismayed at the loss of this wise man. And I, feeling intimidated at the thought, became board President in 1998.

“I met with Michael constantly, asking advice, learning about new IRP issues, making agendas and begging him to sit by me at meetings as I really was not sure about what I was doing.”

Judith emphasized how “Michael fashioned the curriculum and admissions committees that are now taken for granted. He helped the newly appointed Advisory Board figure out what to do and how to do it – board elections among the important new tasks. Believe me, without Michael none of this would have come to pass and the IRP you enjoy today would not exist.”

Judith also learned that Michael not only knew every member’s name but the former career or keen interest of each one and when to urge a member to risk becoming a coordinator. He also seemed to know just what kind of class would be popular and work well. She emphasized that Michael Markowitz made the IRP “the ever more worthy, ever growing and extraordinary adventure it has been for so many fortunate people.”

One can be sure hundreds of current and former students will forever be grateful for the gift of learning and fellowship from the community we call the Institute for Retired Professionals.

A most grateful thank you to Judith Fried

## STATEMENTS ABOUT COORDINATING AT THE IRP

*Jan Adler*



This is my 15<sup>th</sup> year as a member of the IRP. At 55 I retired from a stressful position as a clinical administrator in a state psychiatric facility. By 57 I was searching for a place where I could be part of a group of people I respected where I could bring my energy and skills. At the IRP I was challenged, supported in taking risks and appreciated. Although I never taught before, I started coordinating study groups and 15 years later I have coordinated over 20 times. I also got very involved in the committees and Advisory Board that keep the program functioning at a high level.

About 10 years ago I was diagnosed with wet macular degeneration. Very fortunately I was diagnosed before I had lost any vision, but I was aware that I could wind up with very limited vision or even blind. I started imagining what that would be like and wondering how I would handle it. I read memoirs by people who went blind, and about new treatments for blindness, and new prosthetic devices to help the blind function independently. After doing this reading I realized there was enough material for a study group. Most importantly I found the material exciting and felt I could share my excitement. The question was whether there would be enough people interested in a study group with this focus.

My idea was approved and I had a good enrollment of curious people some of them were facing their own loss of vision, or were close to someone who was. I hoped that the study group would allow people to discuss the reality of blindness with curiosity and openness without becoming a group therapy and it did that. It was both one of the most difficult and rewarding study groups I have done. The IRP members who participated still tell me how much they enjoyed it.

*John Becker*



My name is John Becker. I joined the IRP in the fall of 2000, and became a co-coordinator in 2001 with a study group on the origins of the Civil War (titled "The Road to Fort Sumter"). I have served on several committees, including the Advisory Board, the Curriculum Committee, and the Admissions Committee.

My outside interests include thirty years of community theater in New Jersey (which led to performing as one of the Mighty IRP Art Players for Membership meetings), and photography, which led to the acceptance of several photographs for Voices.

It was probably around mid-October 2011 when members of the Curriculum Committee approached me and several other experienced coordinators. Some folks who were expected to coordinate in the upcoming spring semester were not able to do so, and the CC was facing a study group deficit. Could we possibly come up with a proposal on short notice? I said I'd think about it, and a few days later I said I could.

My idea was simple - or so I thought. I had co-coordinated three study groups related to the Civil War a few years earlier. I owned several books on that subject, and I was familiar with the holdings in my New Jersey library. It shouldn't be difficult to find readings on Abraham Lincoln that could be assembled into a Course Pack.

As it turned out, it wasn't difficult to find such readings. More books have been written on Lincoln than any other American. The problem, as I soon realized, was how to decide which essays, articles, or excerpts to select. It took me a long time to realize that what I was searching for was an organizing principle.



It would have been easy to pick several of the readings I had identified. They were all worthy, informative, and well written. Many students would learn a lot, and many would probably learn some things for the first time.

But, no matter how worthy the individual readings might have been, an accurate title for that study group would have been "The Miscellaneous Lincoln." And that wasn't what I was after.

As the deadline for submitting the proposal approached, and I continued to find other possible sources, a dim light began to flicker. I was able to recognize (finally!) the various roles that Lincoln played throughout his career, particularly during his presidency. And that became the template for deciding how to construct a syllabus, and how to select readings that would meet that criterion.

Result - a study group titled "Looking At Lincoln" that examined Lincoln the Politician (one student said, "I never thought of Lincoln as a politician"), the Commander-in-Chief, the Nationalist, the Orator, and the Revolutionist. And Lincoln the lawyer, who once defended a slave-owner (because the Fugitive Slave Act had to be enforced).

My proudest moment in many years of coordinating came when a woman in that class said, "I'm having some difficulty understanding this new Lincoln I've been meeting." Why proud? Because providing a new way of understanding our greatest president is a worthy goal.

*Eileen Brener*



In 2009 when I was a three-year veteran of IRP, I decided to coordinate a study group about my hometown, New Orleans. I had left the city in a hurry: Hurricane Katrina was breathing down my neck and I had to evacuate; what's more I couldn't go back for weeks. The saddest part of my ordeal was seeing the city six weeks after the storm: the broken levees, the flooding and the gray devastation.

Before Katrina my husband and I often spent vacation time attending operas at Lincoln Center. We realized after the storm that as retirees, we could consider ourselves on permanent vacation on the Upper West Side just blocks from the Met. I found the IRP and began meeting people and enjoying classes about New York City, the opera, literature, poetry.

By 2009 I felt comfortable enough at IRP to enlist as a coordinator. I knew my subject would be my lost city—the pre2005 New Orleans. I began studying and found a world beyond Mardi Gras, jazz funerals, and endless seafood recipes. New Orleans was, “like a great diva ... in a succession of operatic roles,” according to historian Jason Berry. I never loved the city more than when I followed its history in my New Orleans study group.

*Jane Case Einbender*



It was fall of 2002 and I was a brand-new IRP member taking my first study groups, one of which was *The New York Review of Books* seminar, coordinated by Sherryl Ann Feinstein. Here was peer-learning at its pinnacle, with each seminar member responsible for leading a full length session each week. The seminar was the brainchild of Sharon Girard in spring 2002 who envisioned it as a one semester study group, but Sherryl Ann, then a brand-new member, was smitten and carried it forward until she died suddenly in December 2008. I stepped up to carry it on and have been coordinating it every semester since spring 2009.

Coordinating *The New York Review of Books* seminar meshes perfectly with my interests and skills. I am a very curious person who is interested in learning something about every subject in every field - especially new ones. As a former training and development specialist and teacher, I have an ability to work with and coach first-time discussion leaders and prepare them to succeed as first time seminar discussion leaders.

I get an adrenaline rush at the beginning of each semester when I'm under the gun to line up the sessions. I never know who will sign up (although some people take it often) nor what articles will be in the upcoming issues of *The New York Review of Books* (we use new issues as they come out). Only when I have the class roster can I ask some of the regulars to take the first few sessions. Then the race begins in earnest to decide who will lead sessions and collaborate with them on which article they choose. My years of doing needs assessment as a training professional have given me a knack of figuring out what kind of article will probably appeal to each person so I can suggest it to them.

The support I get from seminar members is extraordinary. Their willingness to step up when needed to lead early sessions and their support of each other is essential to our success. Support for each discussion leader provides a human safety net enabling each of us to take risks and stretch into new territory to tackle subjects we may know little about. I am the leader of an extraordinary group of people and we collaborate to build something special together. At the end of each semester, we can look back at the "intellectual feast" we've assembled together and pat each other on the back.

As I embark on my 20th semester of coordinating *The New York Review of Books* seminar this spring of 2019, it remains as fresh and exciting and intellectually stimulating to me as it was the very first semester. Many IRP members seem to agree with me.



The first time I coordinated at IRP I realized I was facing a new and exciting challenge. I wasn't concerned about speaking in front of 25-30 people or organizing material to fill an hour and one-half. I had been a professor for over 30 years and had taught many different undergraduate and graduate courses and was not anxious about teaching. Looking around the room that day, I realized that for the first time I stood in front of a room full of very interested and very smart students, who were there because they had chosen this study group. Not only did they want to learn more about the topic – immigration- but they already knew a great deal from hav-

ing lived a full life. Furthermore, I didn't have to worry that they had never heard of concepts, such as eugenics, as I did when teaching freshmen or sophomores. Nor did I have to introduce them to events, such as the Depression or World War II, many of them had first-hand experience of these events. When I talked about the Lower East Side, hands went up from students who wanted to share stories of their childhood or their parents' lives in that historic neighborhood.

All of that enriched the class. Best of all I didn't have to "pull teeth" to get a discussion going, IRPers were eager to talk. Harnessing that knowledge and enthusiasm required a new approach on my part. How to engage with the lived experience without the class becoming a series of personal anecdotes? Finding just the right reading proved key. Combining both the intellectual examination of the issues with the stories the students told made for a lively class. For example, in another study group I co-coordinated, we used the text, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. I would have hesitated to use a 600-page book in an undergraduate class, but in this study group, that text and other readings allowed for a deep and meaningful study of the topic. Because the book also includes stories of individual migrants – people we get to know over the course of the semester – and because IRPers had come of age during the struggle for civil rights, members of the class were able to connect their experiences to the historical events we were studying.

It is a remarkable gift to lead a discussion with a group of adults who join with you in their enthusiasm for studying the past, and who are passionate about understanding how we got to where we are today. For me, the combination of the intellectual pursuit with the camaraderie that develops in a study group is the heart of IRP.

*Barbara Marwell*



Early in my IRP career, I participated in a study group on the history of Islam. At the end of the semester, along with thanking the coordinator for an interesting experience, I expressed the thought that a study group on contemporary Islam would be valuable. “I’m finished with that topic,” he said. “Why don’t you do it?” Aghast at the suggestion, and intimidated by the prospect of taking on a topic I knew next to nothing about, I politely declined. The idea stayed with me, however, and several years later, I decided to try to tackle the subject. I spent a summer reading and researching and developed a study group entitled “Political Islam”. The study group was well attended; it was a hot topic about which most Americans, including IRPers had minimal knowledge. Serendipitously, a few weeks before the start of the semester, the Arab Spring exploded, and we were in the heart of one of the most salient contemporary issues. Flexibility was the key to coordinating that study group. As a coordinator I sometimes had to put aside my syllabus so that we could talk about events on the ground, in addition to my syllabus which considered how political Islam was expressed in various countries around the world. It was a “learning experience” by fire!

A few years later, buoyed by the positive experience of the political Islam study group, I decided to take another risk and offer a study group on another topic I knew nothing about. Thus was born “Contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa”. No momentous events, comparable to the Arab Spring, marked that experience, but I learned much, as I hope members of the study group did.

Since those experiences, I have coordinated sessions in multi-coordinator groups (Historiography; What is a Nation?) which drew on the knowledge I acquired while preparing for political Islam and Sub-Saharan Africa. My approach to coordinating is to explore a topic I know little about and share the knowledge with my IRP colleagues. To me, this is one of the great joys of being an IRP coordinator – stretching yourself to learn something totally outside of your experience, taking the risk of being the leader in a discussion of the topic and knowing that you are in a supportive environment where everyone want to see success.

*Carol Millsom*



If asked for advice on selecting a study group topic, I would offer two suggestions. First select something you want to learn more about. Of course, you need to know something about the subject to begin with. In my case, I wouldn't attempt artificial intelligence, astronomy, or Puccini's operas, much as I would like to understand more about these topics than I do.

The second bit of advice is to select a subject that provides an excuse to travel. That might be a trip to a distant place or an excursion to an unfamiliar setting in your own neighborhood.

Let me illustrate with an example from my own experience. I have background in decorative art so I selected a topic within that broad field. I already knew something about the Bauhaus, the German art school that so influenced early modernism, but I certainly had a lot to learn. The topic met my other criteria: a reason to go places I hadn't been before. Learning more about the Bauhaus demanded a trip to Weimar and Dessau in East Germany and, as I later discovered, to a museum in Boston I had never heard of. Once in East Germany, I was chagrined to discover that Bauhaus tours in English were almost non-existent. Kindly people came to my rescue. In Weimar a local teacher found me an art student who proved to be an excellent guide. Later in Dessau several Japanese architects invited me to tag along with them and the interpreter they had hired to translate into English. My Japanese companions told me about a museum at Harvard, the Busch-Reisinger that had an outstanding collection of Bauhaus material. A reason for another trip once I got home.

The Bauhaus study group is behind me, but now I am thinking about another one— Decorative Arts in Austria 1900-1914. I would certainly have to go to Vienna to prepare for that one.

*Arlette Sanders*



I've had a remarkably satisfying experience coordinating literature study groups at New School's IRP program. I've been a book group coordinator for many years with private groups in the New York area.

The IRP study groups I've led are unique and mutually gratifying for several reasons.

1. Members are willing to participate in any arcane topics I've suggested. *No Way Out* was focused on literature about entrapment. *Immigrant Studies* examined the immigrant experience in America- Asian, European, past and present. *Strange and Unusual Loves* literature study included *Lolita* and other remarkable love relationships; *Bible Study* examined this incredible compilation of stories as the genesis of great Western thought and writing.

2. The level and astuteness of participation exceeded those of any other group I've led in multiple ways. The IRP members were never reticent about expressing unconventional responses and opinions. By hearing these responses, my own appreciation of the books we discussed, grew and changed. IRP members were a major factor in my own re-examination of "firmly held opinions". Often theirs were grounded in sounded reality.

3. The peer-teaching model is the most significant aspect of this program. We were all equals. I was a facilitator, not a leader. I was one among equals- and surely those equals were extraordinary- in intellectual appreciation as well as sensitivity to the human variations depicted in the books we read.

I generally conducted a literary study group one semester every other year. Those were among the richest months of my intellectual, social and emotional opportunities for growth and enrichment. It was, of course, my hope that I could pass along that enthusiasm to study group participants. I was immensely gratified that a large number of IRP members returned to these groups whenever they were offered. Obviously IRP members wanted stimulation, discussion and excellent literature in their lives!! Long may the IRP live...

*Ken Witty*



I spent almost 50 years as a journalist and television writer and producer, first at Life Magazine, then at CBS New, The PBS NewsHour, Wall Street Journal Television and Channel 13 in New York. I also spent many years running my own production company doing videos for corporations and non-profit organizations.

I enjoyed my work and loved the kind of collaboration that is involved in making television programs. Having a work community is an important part of a career. One doesn't appreciate that until you lose that community. When I was running my own business, there were periods when I worked alone and could not wait until we got into production so that I could be surrounded by a camera crew and later work alongside a video editor, graphic artist, composer and all the people who make television happen.

So when I retired in 2013, I knew I wanted to find a new community, a community to learn with. When I heard about the IRP from a friend and looked it up online, I knew that it was the place for me. Now in my fifth year at the IRP, the experience has exceeded my expectations. And now that I am preparing my fifth Study Group for fall of 2019, I can say that being a coordinator is an extremely rewarding undertaking.

I was lucky to have a wonderful mentor and now friend, Jan Adler, who right away in my first semester, advised me to coordinate as soon as possible. He said, you learn so much more about a subject if you teach it. That has been absolutely my experience.

I spent my whole career making various subjects accessible to a large public, but I never taught a class. When I was asked by Dick Kossoff to co-coordinate a study group about the Changing American Economy my second year, I was most anxious. But the IRP has wonderful trainers who help new coordinators learn the ropes and get over the anxiety of teaching for the first time. Even experienced teachers and professors must learn to teach the IRP way, which means being a discussion leader and not a lecturer.

The IRP epitomizes peer-to-peer learning, since the teachers and students are age peers with a lifetime of experiences in a variety of fields. I have always felt that those in my study group are my collaborators. And since I choose to teach subjects of which I start off knowing little if nothing, I hope and count on some members of the class knowing more than I know about the subject.



My second study group is an example. It began when I read an article in The Financial Times about forecasting the future. It was about the work of Philip Tetlock, a professor at The University of Pennsylvania. I thought that would be an interesting study group and spent the next few months reading up and figuring out how that might work over twelve weekly 90 minute sessions. The more I learned, the more interesting the subject became, and I realized that by focusing on forecasting, we could examine how good we are at predicting everything from the stock market to the weather to political elections. And the timing was excellent since the study group would be in session during the presidential election year of 2016. As part of the learning process, everyone had to predict the outcome and could change their forecast from week to week. Good predictions are like good writing, they can be re-written and edited over and over and get better over time.

I discovered there was even an equation first formulated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, called Bayes Law that let's one improve the accuracy of a prediction as one learns of more hard information.

Not feeling comfortable in explaining equations, I had a student (participant) do a presentation of Bayes law and the reasoning involved. I also used a book called "The Wisdom of Crowds" that explains and demonstrates how in many cases the crowd can be more accurate in forecasting than any single expert.

Indexing in the stock market is an example of how the wisdom of millions of investors around the world can outperform most expert investors over time. The class was shocked and incredulous at this idea and phenomenon. As a sometimes contrarian thinker, I enjoyed their incredulity and difficulty in acknowledging the power of the wisdom of crowds and its superiority over the experts.

Ever since I joined the IRP in 2014, I have embraced the many opportunities that it offers. As many retirees say, I think I am busier now than when I was working for a living. I have been the chairman of the Fridays@One lecture series, a member of the Advisory Board, a member of the Admissions Committee and the Communications Committee, a participant in Special Interest Groups (SIGs) about art and music, as well as a member of the Men's Group that meets once a week for half an hour.

I have been a mentor to new members and a Conversation Partner with international students who need to practice their English. Sometimes my enthusiasm outruns my energy levels, but it is extremely rewarding to have found myself a member of a very special community that wants to learn together and spend time with each other.

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