



**Irvina Lew**  
**ROBS History Project**  
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Irvina was born on December 26 Irvina Sandra Siegel, and after marrying became Irvina Siegel Lew. She then spoke of the origin of the name “Irvina”. She said it was an interesting story that she recently learned. Her uncle Bach, who she believed came from Russia, was tutored to Harvard Medical School by a Swedish woman whose name was Irvina. He had named his daughter Irvina, but she hated the name and didn’t use it. Irvina Lew said she really loves her name. When she was young, she used to be called Irv and while in Girl Scout camp, they called her Sandy. When she got to be 15 or 16, she decided that she wanted to be called by her full name Irvina. This was the origin of the name, but in the Jewish religion of being named after a deceased relative, she was named after her Uncle Isidor who was her father’s brother. His family lived in Babylon.

When Irvina was all ready in her 60’s she went to the Babylon (or Lindenhurst) Jewish Synagogue Cemetery where she saw that her whole family was buried there. She said, *“And there was Isidore, Siegel, Harris Siegel, my father and my sister Harriet Esther. Why my father never took me to that cemetery? I grew up in Bay Shore. It was mind boggling to see my whole, I mean, it was like, people go to Ireland, or they go to Russia, or they go to the other parts of the world. I went from Bay Shore. I went to Babylon, and there was, maybe it's the Lindenhurst cemetery, my whole family and my uncle Isidor, who died of tuberculosis right before I was born”*

Irvina was asked if she had ever taken an interest in genealogy. She said she was interested in her family background. She goes to some family parties and has traveled to Israel and met the second cousin twice removed on a kibbutz who is a farmer. She likes meeting relatives, and last year she made a party for 30 relatives to have a family reunion and meet each other. She said that her father, who died at 92, never tried to trace the family's history. Irvina said that she is going to videotape her mother when she visits this summer, because she didn't want to lose the stories that are "fabulous". She did have a family tree from her father's cousin. She said that Siegel was an old Babylon name, and that there was a Siegel Street there. Her father went to Babylon High School. There was a very small Jewish community in Babylon where her father lived. During World War I, he sold newspapers to the troops who were stationed at Belmont Lake State Park.

The interviewer pointed out that Babylon and Lindenhurst were a "hotbed of Rightist activity during the 20's". Irvina then spoke about what it was like growing up in Bay Shore if you were Jewish. She said, *"I don't know all of the stories, but of course, I grew up in Bay Shore. I was stoned. I was stoned when I got off the bus to go to Hebrew school. I mean, I'm here to talk about wonderful things, but there was that element. I mean, there was that element, and I still live in Bay Shore, and imagine my disappointment. Just a year or so ago, we went to a party at Captain Bills. It was a Christmas party, and I wore my one red jacket. I don't know, I guess whatever happened, some guy got drunk, and he came into the ladies room, and I said, 'Please leave, and he was really offensive and abusive. I said, 'Leave or we're going to have to call the police to get you out.' And in his drunken stupor, he called me some very filthy names among which Jew was in there, and not knowing me at all. But, the upsetting thing was that in his anger, when he started cursing, that's what came out. That kind of internal hatred came out whether or not he knew I was or not. And fortunately, I'm very happy to say that the fishing club -- and I don't remember the name of the tuna club, I guess Tuna Club, the next day they met and dismissed him. That's a good sign. So you like to think that it's completely gone, then every once in a while something hits you in the face in every kind of thing."*

Irvina then said that there were lots of stories about being local. She told the following, " *Well, so Daddy was a basketball star in Babylon. My mother, Schwartzberg, grew up in East Islip. At her high school, 50th reunion, I mean, she was a basketball champion at East Islip High School. So I have actually been, let's say in the Abacos. I mean funny little stories. Bob and I are sailing in the Abacos, which are the northern Bahamas. I wrote a story about it once, and in the New York Times, the editor called me up - he says, 'If I don't know where the Abacos are, nobody knows where the Abacos are.'" Irvina said that the more you travel the more you appreciate your hometown especially because she lives in the place where she grew up and worked. She said it's wonderful being local.*

What's Irvina's present family situation? She responded, "*I'm married to the same guy that I married when I was a kid. I have three adult daughters. Allison is married to an artist Kenny Bloomer. Alison owns her own business. She has a partner, and they're graphic artists, and they do a lot of corporate work. And the thing, it's only one aspect of her work, but because I'm very interested in food and chefs, she does award winning cookbooks . . . 10 of the top cookbooks of the season, Allison has designed six of them.*" Irvina has become "quite a chef" and has been writing about chef's techniques for a long time.

Her second daughter, Sharon, owns her own business, which she called Lewin Company. Sharon is an agent to television directors who make commercials. She's married to Steven Block who's an art director at BBD&O. They have two children.

Emma is a five and a half year old, and Sage an 18 month old. Emma was just accepted into a New York City public school and also a special little school for musically gifted children. They live in Battery Park City with a view of the Statue of Liberty and have a beach house on Long Island. Irvina said that this is one of the reasons she'll stay in Bay Shore forever. She can take the ferry to their beach house on the weekends and stay with them. According to Irvina, *"It's the kind of way that I was able to have my children grow up with their grandmother ... A very natural, not a once a year visit, but this is a very natural kind of sleepovers."*

Her third daughter, Jennifer, lives in Hollywood and makes movies. She worked with Steven Spielberg, and her biggest works were Independence Day and Godzilla. Irvina went to the premiere of Godzilla. Her daughter spent six months in South Carolina working with Mel Gibson, and she was the assistant to the producer of The Patriot, which was a wonderful experience for her.

Irvina was then asked to speak about her sons-in-law. She said, *"Kenny's an artist and the kind of guy who reads to his wife and reads the Odyssey and the Iliad. They're very intellectual. They like Italy a lot. They rent a place for three weeks or something. Steven is almost foreign to me. Steven knows everything about ...he's the kind of person who could sing the commercials to every television program. I mean he knows a culture that I have no idea about. Steven just was recognized at the awards last week. He did the commercial during the Super Bowl. I have my interests. They just don't coincide with the rest of America. Steven did a commercial with a cell phone and this disabled artist, I don't know if you saw that commercial. It was a very meaningful commercial, and it wasn't a funny commercial, so maybe they shouldn't have aired it during the Super Bowl. It was recognized as one of the best commercials of the year, and I'm very proud of him. And he's such a great daddy. He takes care of the kids."*

Irvina was blessed with a wonderful family. She said, *"The thing I'm proudest of is having been able to balance being the working mother, maintaining*

*the marriage and having good relationships with children. Yes, and I'm not denying this part of me, and being able to create my own... to write you know, after being the teacher... to also be able to reinvent myself in another way...to manage that ...a lot of people couldn't do that."*

Irvina was then asked how she and her husband Bob had met. Irvina said that she had just transferred from William and Mary to Adelphi College, because she had just broken up with her boyfriend. She met her husband in the cafeteria at Adelphi in May of her second year. She was sitting in the cafeteria and a guy sat down at the next table and said, *"If I met the right girl, I'd be married in six months"*. Irvina said, *"Well, I turned around and I pulled my chair. And I put out my hand and I said hi, I'm Irvina Seigel. I was very shy. And we started dating, and Bob is the kind of guy that if he liked somebody he picked them up. He picked me up before school and after school in college. We had breakfast together. We had lunch. We went out every night and I left for Europe. In mid May I guess when school was out for summer at The Sorbonne. I had convinced my father that I could go to Europe and save him money by completing college in three years if only he would give me the money to go to Europe for the summer and I would go to the Sorbonne, and I would study French and blah, blah, blah. And my father said, Fine. And I went to Europe for three months that summer. And I came back, I guess, the end of August. And Bob and I were married within six weeks."* Irvina was 19 and her husband was 21. He had been in the army stationed in Nashville and had a very interesting career. Irvina said he had a little adventure and was most exciting and still remains so. He has an enthusiasm and an intellectual curiosity.

What has Irvina's husband Bob taught her? *"He has enriched my life in countless ways. From the very beginning when we were dating, we went to jazz clubs on 52nd Street. We would talk with Andre Previn. I mean, we went to the theater when we had zilch money, and we had a first house and a first baby. I was teaching at Bay Shore High School, and I was maybe 21, and he was 23. We would have a babysitter. We went to the theater every Wednesday night. I mean, we*

*may have picked up McDonald's on the way and parked on the street, but we were at the theater every Wednesday Jazz night." We always had tickets to Bernstein, because we never really had a lot of money, there was a time when I didn't pay for the Philharmonic... Bob broadened my horizons in many ways and he still does. He's now a photographer to my travel. We've just come back from Israel. It's my seventh trip. It was so much more interesting because I was traveling with him, because he sees things that I don't see. I mean, yeah. So it's interesting."*

Bob's family background was the same as Irvina's, very involved in the synagogue. Irvina's mother worked with her father who was in the fuel oil business. She did the books and took the messages, and the people came to the house to pay their bills. Irvina's mother was really a full time, working woman who according to Irvina didn't get credit for it, didn't get a salary and who didn't have a loan or Social Security. *"My mother was also much happier washing a truck or than cleaning a house for example. My mother-in-law was a fancy lady. I mean, in many ways, I've become my mother-in-law in her sophistication... She was fancy to me at that time. She was a fancy lady...She was a wonderful woman and very interested in the arts and was a decorator and an art dealer, and she was pretty interesting. "I wasn't quite a hick from Bay Shore, because my aunt and uncle had taken me on a cruise. I went to the theater from the time I was very young. Julie Franci, my French teacher had taken me to a French restaurant in the city when I was 16. I'm, you know, I had gone to camp and traveled some, but I wasn't as sophisticated as Bob or Bob's Family, who were to my mind, wealthy Rockville Center well traveled."*

What are the earliest memories you had as a child? Irvina remembered going swimming at Benjamin's Beach at the end of Clinton Avenue in Bay Shore and her father throwing her off the float. He had taught her to swim. She remembered the huge homes on Clinton Avenue that people from Central Park West used in the summer. She remembered having rocks thrown at her when she would get off the school bus. She also had a lot of memories of Girl Scout Camp

Beaty in Bayport. She remembered her father used to call her “My Shaggy Dog”, because she had straight hair that her mother used to put a curling iron on the stove to heat it up to try to give her curls. She said that he was generous to a fault. He would supply people with fuel without ever getting charged. He would give Irvina money all the time. She said he didn’t teach her to budget so well because, *“I always thought even at college, I just wrote checks and somebody would fill up the bank account,”*

Irvina said she really loved growing up in Bay Shore. She remembered going out on the bay in little boats when she was 12 years old. She said she was a tomboy and *“went from tomboy to sexy in 9th grade.”* When she was in high school, she had a lot of friends from Brentwood, because at that time the Brentwood students attended Bay Shore High School since there was no high school in Brentwood. She said that this is part of her affinity with Brentwood.

Were there other adults in her life beside her parents who had an influence on her? She said her aunt and uncle who lived across the street from her, although she said they paid more attention to her sister who was 4 years older than her.

Who influenced her to become a teacher? Irvina was the first person in her family to go to college, and it was her parents who felt very strongly about her becoming a teacher. She attended William and Mary College.

What was her first paying job? She worked at the Bay Shore Jewish Center and earned \$50 a week. They were fundraising for a new synagogue at the time and had hired a professional fundraiser, and Irvina did the filing, the phone calls and the bookkeeping, working Monday through Thursday. She said she spent her salary each week buying Cashmere sweaters.

Was there one particular holiday that was important to your family? Passover was the big holiday with at least 40 people, and her sister kept the tradition. Yom Kippur, breaking the fast was also very important.

Were there certain interests that she had that she was passionate about as a kid? When she was 16 years old she taught young Judea songs and dances. She knew from very young how much she loved teaching. She also loved clothes and enjoyed reading. She had an absolute appreciation for languages as early as 3rd or 4th grade when she attended Hebrew School. In 9th grade she passed the Hebrew Regents and studied Latin, which she said she absolutely loved, and studied French in 10th grade. Her high school French teacher, Julie Franchi, was the single most important mentor that influenced Irvina to teach. *“When she taught history, she taught culture”*. Irvina remembered arranging to have the Bay Shore High School closed one day and all the students bussed to the Bay Shore Theater to see a movie when she was a senior. Irvina said that she was certainly not shy but a very assertive student.

Is she a morning person or a night person? Does she have a favorite season of the year? Irvina said she is definitely a morning person, and her favorite season is spring because of the flowers.

She was then asked if she had certain aromas that trigger memories?” Her response was, *“I call it taste. I taste the air where I live. I don’t even think of the aroma. I do think of the aroma when I’m hiking in a desert, and I’m writing a story about that now.* Irvina was writing articles for newspapers where she can write first person articles and wrote a piece for *The Record*. The topic is why she loves spas because of the different aromas, like for example sage.

What was Irvina’s least favorite subject in school? She didn’t like chemistry. She didn’t take it in high school but did take it in college.



Irvina was then asked to speak about what she did after graduating from college and her path to her teaching career. At Adelphi College she majored in French and minored in education and Spanish. She was pregnant with her daughter in her last year of college. Her daughter was born on July 20th, a week before she completed her last class that she was taking in summer school. In mid August she received a call from Bay Shore High School saying that they needed a French and Spanish substitute. She was living in East Rockaway at the time. She substituted extensively in Bay Shore High School so she could get the credit for student teaching, which she hadn't taken in college. The following year she then got a full time teaching position at Bay Shore High School and taught there for 2 years. She had quit teaching to stay home with her daughter who was two years old at the time. Three years later in 1962 she started subbing in Brentwood High School. In January 1964 she was hired in Brentwood as a full time teacher to take the place of a teacher that was fired. She taught 7th, 8th and 9th grades and had the same students for 3 years. She loved her job. She worked at West Junior High School under Jeffrey Dwyer. She then taught at East Middle School. While in Brentwood she taught, French, Spanish and E.S.L.

Irvina was predominantly a French teacher her first few years at West Junior High teaching 5 French classes a day and did not teach Spanish. When she did teach Spanish, she taught a class that she created which was Spanish for Spanish-Speakers. Many of the Brentwood students were native Spanish speakers fluent in their language, but did not read or write in Spanish. Irvina was proud of her accomplishment in creating this course and getting these students to be literate in their native language. They not only learned grammar in their language, but it carried over into learning grammar in English. She also felt proud that she prepared her students for the S.A.T.'s.

Irvina was asked if she got involved in the B.T.A., (Brentwood Teachers Association), and she said she didn't, because she said she didn't ever want to get involved in school politics, although she was involved in local politics on a State level. She was involved in Suffolk County politics on a state level. She had even thought about running for a political office at one time.

Irvina had written and published several books. Her first book was *You Can't Do It All*. She then wrote *Mom's Survival Guide* and *Romantic Weekends in and around New York*. She loves writing articles about a variety of subjects.

When did she decide to retire? Irvina started teaching in Brentwood on January 20, 1964 and retired on January 31, 1994. Several years before she actually retired she had thought about it. She wondered if there were other things she should be doing with her life besides teaching. She felt she had some other unfulfilled ambition. She had some ambitions, in writing, in television and in media. She remembered a conversation that she had with Steve Howland one day where she said, *"There has to be more, because what are they going to write on my tombstone? 'Irvina Lew...teacher?' You know... 'Wife, mother teacher?' I wanted to do something more"*. Irvina said that what Steve Howland said in response was the best thing. His response was, *"Irvina, do you know what they are going to write on your tombstone? Here lies Irvina. She knew how to live."*

Irvina then proceeded to explain the circumstances of her coming to the final decision to actually retire. *"I had a letter in my mailbox...The Spanish Embassy and the New York State Department of Education is offering a summer session for teachers at the University of Salamanca... (I had never done that, because I always had children at home...I had never gone away for a summer, and my kids by now were grown)...teachers must come back and teach for one year. "I was going to be 55 years old, and I had all ready determined that I had to guarantee my security ...the pension, the medical part of it...in the last few years that was part of it. I wanted to retire young enough to achieve any other ambitions that I had. I didn't or never got to the point where I didn't like what I was doing... No student deserves a teacher who doesn't want to be there."* After coming back from Spain, she returned to teach in September and informed the district that she wanted to retire on her birthday that was in December, but she retired on January 31.

What have you been doing since you retired? Her first year of retirement she was asked to be the editor and travel editor of *The Long Island Bride* magazine. She traveled well and had a wonderful experience and really loved doing it. She runs a chef seminar and is active in the wine trade. She writes for wine enthusiasts and restaurants. She also writes about art and antiques. She reads a lot of “foody” books. When asked if there was a most important book in her life, she said, “*Iberia*”, by James Michener. She reads it every time she goes to Spain and every time she feels like reading a chapter.

Is there anything that you would have liked to have accomplished but didn't? She would like to have been a more successful ESL teacher. She felt a little unfulfilled in that area.

What advice would you give to young teachers starting out? She thinks that they should get some experience first as a substitute teacher. She said you learn by doing. You should work in different districts to get the experience.

Irvina was then asked to recall and speak about the horrific incident that occurred in East Junior High School while she was teaching there on May 16, 1983, the day the students were held hostage by a gunman. After the event, Irvina had written an article about it in *Newsday*. The following is the article that Irvina wrote in the Viewpoints of *Newsday*:

“The People at East Junior High”

By Irvina Siegle Lew

*The fingers touching these typewriter keys were unable to grasp a cup Tuesday without spilling the coffee. I was still shaking after the ordeal a week ago of being closeted in the classroom in Brentwood's East Junior High School up the hall from where students were kept hostage. One of my former students, Robert Wicks, shot a boy, and another former student, Wilfredo Mercado risked his life to carry the boy out. Our principal, Steve Howland, was wounded. Our students*

*scarred by fright, our staff terrorized and our community bewildered by a tragedy, but while news reports focused on why a mild mannered man exploded into a rage that victimized so many, they ignored the rest of the story. For beyond the quotes stating what was seen and heard, what was feared and felt, is the story of an ordinary group of individuals who love kids and an ordinary group of teenagers who know they are cared for at school. Because of the invisible bond of love, they handled an extraordinary situation magnificently. The principal, Steve Howland, stands at the front entrance each day to greet students and staff. To some he's the adored father substitute. To others he's the perfect role model. To still others he's the man around whom the school world revolves. He's the tough guy when warranted, the coach who pulls the team through difficult seasons, the problem solver with an open door. Shot in the face while dealing with the kind of crisis intervention that everyone agrees is not part of the job-description, he was back at work the next morning. He wanted to support the staff and calm the student body. While particular acts of courage emerge in news stories, the efforts that dealt so effectively with an explosive multi faceted event were ignored. Frank Carnese, an Assistant Principal entered the room six times to negotiate for student release. The teacher who's classroom was invaded, Peggy Del Bene, had to be restrained from going back to sit it out with her students. The hall duty teacher, Tom Bozza took Del Bene to the next room to see that she would be cared for. The school secretary, Anita De Pala, calmly relayed messages from the gunman over the intercom. Teacher Esther Klein, soothed parents until 11:00 pm. Cafeteria workers made coffee and sandwiches long after their workday was over. During the evacuation effort, Administrative Assistant, Mark Nizewitz, went quietly from room to room to tell the students what to do, and then a line of administrators, staff members and police officers shepherded us out with their warm faces and encouraging voices. Inside the school the students handled themselves maturely, not only those who had seen a man with a gun, but also those who had seen police officers with rifles and imagined the rest. They walked through the halls*

*without a sound, and when they came out into the rain, and the reporters and the hysteria that they had contained for an hour or more welled up, they comforted one another. When they saw a teacher they ran over for the hug or holding which they knew would help. They asked teachers to be there for this friend or that who wasn't handling the stress well. What made the scene unique was not that people found that friends were there in a crisis, what made it unique was that the support system had been put in place in times of non-crisis. Though I have taught in many schools, I had seen at East Junior High more sensitivity than elsewhere. There's a sense of family that's unusual. In our school, people reach out to and hug one another, and kisses be taken only a small part of the love inside. It was not unusual to see Brian Lopez, the basketball star who acted as an intermediary, and was the last hostage to leave, kiss and hug his teacher. In the cacophony of emotions ranging from concern for our students to pity for the young man, to fear that escalates in direct proportion to the availability of guns, to anger that someone can invade our private world and control our destiny, one emotion predominates...pride. I'm proud to be part of the East Junior High family. While we might not have been able to meet the needs of the former student who so disrupted our lives, we're proud that each day we try our best to meet each youngster's needs. We do it in such a warm and loving environment, that when we all needed each other, we knew we could rely on each other's strengths, expertise, bravery and caring. And now as we try and mend ourselves and get back to the business of teaching and learning, we remain ready to fulfill each other's needs.*

*Irvina concluded the interview by saying that, "Our students and all kids are so needy and so hungry, needing to be loved, that I was lucky enough some years to have smaller classes than others, but was always lucky enough to get involved with kids...There was that love there, and I miss that one-to-one loving of teaching, which is why some day I hope to teach teachers.*