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HILLTOWN CHAUTAUQUA WILL EXPLORE ROOTS OF DEMOCRACY WITH DAY-LONG FESTIVAL OF TALKS, THEATER AND MUSIC IN ASHFIELD, APRIL 22, 2017

Five months after it launched with “Earthcare,” an eco-festival in Cummington, Massachusetts, the Hilltown Chautauqua is readying a second program on an equally urgent topic, the survival of American democracy.

“Civitas: A Celebration of Democracy,” on April 22, will be a moveable feast of scholarly talks, a dramatic reading, an evening concert of early American music, and lots of informal conversation, in Ashfield, Massachusetts.

The day-long sequence of events will take place in two lovely, historic venues in downtown Ashfield: St. John’s Episcopal Church, and the barn at Gloriosa & Co. at the Curtis House, a B and B next door to the church.

“The topic urged itself,” said David Perkins, the Chautauqua’s founder and director. “In a period of turmoil and anguish over our politics, I decided to pass over the issues that are often talked about by commentators—gerrymandering, inequality, campaign finance, ‘The Big Sort,’ false news, etc.—and, instead, return to fundamentals, to the wellsprings of democracy. My premise is this: To really find a way forward, we need to remember where we came from.”

The Hilltown Chautauqua was founded in 2016 by Perkins, a former professor of journalism at UMASS-Amherst, “with a group of Hilltown friends” and the help of the Hilltown Community development Corporation and its director Dave Christopolis. Its mission is to offer programs on pressing issues in American life with a mixed-format of talks, music, poetry, drama, and visual arts, in different Hilltown venues.

Its first program, “Earthcare: The Sense of Wonder,” took place in September at the Bryant Homestead, and drew several hundred attendees from the hilltowns and Pioneer Valley, and as far away as New York and Boston.

“We are reviving an American institution of the Progressive Era,” Perkins noted. “And one that meets contemporary needs, for breadth, social contact, and what they used to call ‘uplift’.”

The original Chautauqua Institution opened in 1878 as an adult education institute on Lake Chautauqua in western New York State. It flourished, and around the turn of the century privately run “circuit chautauquas” became a popular feature of American rural life, pitching their famous tents in more than 1200 rural communities, until the 1920s, when radio, movies, and the automobile arrived. Still, several permanent chautauquas survive, including the original in New York State, and today, public forums are experiencing a revival.

“Why is that? I think there is a certain loneliness in virtual living,” Perkins said. “We want something more. We want to sit down together for what I call the ‘larger conversation.’ Our

communities were built on that, actually, and we need a lot more of it. That's the premise of what we're doing."

The Hilltowns are an ideal place to launch a chautauqua, Perkins said. "The area is of course very beautiful, with an interesting and important history, and hilltowners are lively, creative, and politically engaged people: writers, artists, poets, craftspeople, musicians, environmentalists, academics, retirees, small-business people, and so on. On the negative side, we lack a community college or other regional institutional hub, and it's a long drive to the college towns in the Pioneer Valley.

"We are building an institution rooted where we live that answers a need, drawing on local and regional talent, joined by nationally known invited figures, in what I hope are thoughtful, original programs that are worth making a trip to see and hear."

"Civitas" is the Roman word for the understanding that binds together a community. "And that seems to be what we're lacking at the moment," Perkins said. "How does one create it, or rebuild it? A lot of people are wondering about that right now."

When he was contemplating a spring program, Perkins at first considered a program on the decline in church attendance and the rise of the "nones," or "none of the aboves." "And then, with the campaign and the election, I became interested in the connection between religion and democracy. Has the decline of organized religion affected our sense of social obligation, or citizenship? The Founders assumed the two were entwined, and so did Alexis de Tocqueville in his 1830 book, 'Democracy in America.'

"Without a vision of equals in a 'beloved community,' without civic education in the school curriculum, and without shared symbols of national identity and values—all of which have been eroded for one reason or another—we have to ask, what binds us together in a common purpose? How do we get over artificial categories of gender, race, class?"

There are enough questions for many programs, Perkins said. "But the Revolutionary period offers a good starting point. The work of that generation is always inspiring. Imagine deciding to remake the whole political system, and drawing on your deepest reflection, faith, and principles to meet that challenge! I think we could use a little, maybe a lot, of their sense of duty, courage, thoughtfulness, and, yes, deep literacy. And I believe those qualities must be somewhere in our DNA. This is a crisis of confidence, and a crisis of imagination, but we've come through worse."

To explore some of these themes, the "Civitas" program is built around talks by three noted writer-scholars and public intellectuals:

* Stephen Marini, a professor and chair of religious studies at Wellesley College, who will speak on the "Sources of American Democratic Faith," and its roots in Puritanism and the English Enlightenment.

* Randall Balmer, a professor and chair of religious studies at Dartmouth College, who will discuss “Evangelicalism in Politics, from the Great Awakening to Trump.” Professor Balmer is the author of many books, including “Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America,” which was made into an Emmy-nominated, three-part documentary for PBS. Brought up in the evangelical tradition, he became one of its most eloquent critics. He also became an Episcopal priest.

* Amy Kittelstrom, associate professor of history at Sonoma State College (California), will talk about New England’s tradition of progressive free-thinkers. She is the author of “The Religion of Democracy,” a history of the progressive tradition in American religious and spiritual thought.

For attendees, morning talks will be given at St. John’s Church, followed by bag lunch will be provided by Gloria Pacosa in her beautifully renovated barn at Gloriosa & Co. In the afternoon, attendees return to the church for a round-table discussion. This is followed by tea at Gloriosa and C, and a semi-staged reading of the poetry and letters of Phillis Wheatley, the Boston slave who became famous the first African-American poet to publish a book of poetry, will be performed by Amina Jordan-Mendez, a Holyoke poet-performer. The day ends with an evening concert of early American vocal music, performed by Norumbega Harmony, the Boston-based early music vocal ensemble, led by Stephen Marini, with guest artists Mary Hubbell, soprano, and organist Larry Schipull.

The Hilltown Chautauqua will return with a second Earthcare festival, on Sept. 15–17, at the Bryant Homestead, on a theme of “Food, Farms, and the Land.” Among the speakers and performers signed up are Frances Moore Lappé, author of *Diet for a Small Planet*; nature writer Rowan Jacobsen; May Boeve, executive director of 350.org; and Brian Donahue, a professor of environmental studies at Brandeis University. The beloved folk musicians Jay Ungar and Molly Mason will perform at the opening night concert on Friday, Sept. 15.

The Hilltown Chautauqua a non-profit organization under the fiscal sponsorship of the Hilltown Community Development Corporation in Chesterfield. Its programs are funded by donations and grants from public and private foundations.

For ticketing and further information, visit www.hilltownchautauqua.org, or call David Perkins at 1-413-634-5716.