A Finely Tuned Airstream Is FOREVER

By Tom Bentley

You’re probably familiar with the idea that old instruments have the truest, richest sound, which is why a Stradivarius violin carries extraordinary value after hundreds of years. There’s something of that cachet in a vintage Airstream, though it’s more the look and feel than the sound of an old trailer.

But what about making a beautiful noise in an old trailer? That mission has been capably undertaken by the Where Girl Radio Lives! (WGRL) Internet radio station, whose polished recording studio is housed in a 1958 Airstream Overlander, and Maren Elwood of Digital Divas Rock, who conducts anthropological interviews and runs event social media from an 1989 Airstream motorhome.

Airstream Airwaves

The WGRL station is just one of the opportunities available at the Lower East Side Girls Club (LESGC) in New York, a three-floor complex offering low-income teens and families educational and career-training options. The girls and young women of WGRL, aged 8-23, are learning digital sound design and multimedia production to stimulate interest in music technology careers — and to have fun.

“With a few exceptions, all of our programming is done in tandem with the girls so that they will learn journalism and audio engineering skills in a very hands-on, effective method,” says Kelly Webb, WGRL and audio programs manager.

The station’s programming is broad, but with local roots. “Our content ranges from all the fantastic programming that happens in-house along with our special guests: women from the fields of science, technology, music, art, and social justice who are making waves in their chosen field. We also do project-based stories about our community,” says Webb.

The trailer’s programming was a bit more woodsy. Dave and Lyn Pentecost, co-founders of the LESGC, bought the Overlander in the Adirondacks long before any visions of radio heaven entered their eyes. Years after parking the trailer near their Adirondack cabin, they came up with the radio station concept for the club.

“We completely gutted the trailer and removed the flooring and internal panels before we transported it. Every bit of the new interior was built onsite at the Girls Club, including conduits for all the audio cables and air-conditioning ducts under the floor. A second door was built on the backside, leading to a ramp for wheelchair access,” says Dave Pentecost.
The task of transforming the trailer into a studio was given to the Walters-Stork Design Group (WSDG), which has built TV and music studios for over 45 years. The trailer’s tires and axle were removed and it was put on casters before being hoisted up to the second floor of the LESGC building.

“Everyone asks, ‘How did you get it in here?’ says Dave Pentecost. “Audio engineers are amazed at the gear that we have in it. With the help of WSDG, it more than fulfills the vision: a complete professional control/mix room and separate isolation room in one trailer is unique and very practical.”

The space outside the trailer is used as both a classroom and stage for live performances.

All of the station’s programs are provided free of charge to the community and the world. Webb says there’s a lasting takeaway that the students gain from the program: “The sense of achievement that a girl gets from finding her own voice, seeing a creative project materialize from idea to reality, and getting a peek into a vast industry that holds career opportunities in music production, journalism, audio technology, and engineering.”
Elwood’s company, Digital Divas Rock, has a floating crew of five or six people with varying talents — photography, social media, film — to help her with event work, including a drone pilot who captures aerial shots. When she’s not on her Cyber Census jaunts or at a media-lab happening, she lives in the Airstream in Carmel Valley CA. It takes half a day for her and a helper to store personal items and get the 325 road-ready.

Elwood feels the Airstream has become a part of the American identity, and hers as well. “Airstreams are so iconic because they mean the freedom to get up and go on the road and experience the world. For me personally, what this vehicle does — and the reason I continue to live in it, as opposed to living in an apartment — is it gives me the freedom to be able to pick up and go whenever I want,” she says. “I am so proud to own it, and I didn’t feel that way about any of the other vehicles that I ever rented.”

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