

## **LLAIC Celebrates 10 Years of Adult Learning on the Road Less Taken**

At the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one demographic statistic was making headlines: the United States population was aging faster than ever. Fifty years ago, one out of every 10 Americans was a senior citizen (defined as 65 and older). Current census projections estimate this share will soon grow to one out of every five. At the same time, the average lifespan has increased significantly: In 1950, the life expectancy in the US was 65.6 years for men and 71.1 years for women. In 2007, the numbers were 79.3 years for men and 83.8 years for women. Economists and politicians fretted, focused as they were on the financial burdens of increased longevity. One philanthropist saw an opportunity, not a dilemma: rather than just increase years of life, his goal was to enhance years of living.

In 2001 Bernard Osher, through his eponymous foundation, sponsored Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (OLLI) through grants to, by this time, 125 colleges and universities throughout the US. The OLLI charter was to offer noncredit courses, free of assignments or grades, to adults over age 50. Thus lifelong learning in the Boston area proliferated.

### **Becoming Independent**

As participants in one of these OLLI programs, a core group of 11 highly motivated people came together around their enjoyment of the high-quality learning experiences. They loved the classes, especially those taught by their peers, and they appreciated the opportunities—though limited—to socialize with fellow students. But they wanted more independence and autonomy. So they met off-site to plan their own program, independent of any academic institution. At the heart of their discussions was a simple question: What if we could have both more. . . and less? A robust, high-quality program of courses but with more emphasis on a greater variety of activities with opportunities to socialize and less oversight, control, and dependence upon a hosting university? In other words, what was the feasibility of creating a whole new organization? Was there room in the area for another lifelong learning program and could quality instruction be developed outside of a university environment?

The small group of founders believed there was untapped interest in such an organization. But they were surprised and frankly unprepared for the response to their modest efforts at publicity. The first informational meeting, on a beautiful spring day in April of 2014, brought out an overwhelming response: 325 people came, and police had to be called to manage the traffic. The first classes were held in Fall 2014, just five months later.

There were challenges from the beginning, namely funding and meeting space for starters. And what about logistics, administration, registration systems, etc.? The founding team funded an initial budget to buy computers, projectors, screens, software, files, and folders.

After that, it was up to the membership to pay its way. Now, ten years later, the breakaway program, LLAIC, run almost solely by volunteers, is going strong and looking toward the future.

### **Creating an identity**

LLAIC was founded as collaborative, secular, and non-affiliated—independent of any sponsoring organization or institution. So naturally, the name reflected this identity. It wrote itself: Lifelong Learning—An Independent Collaborative. There was soon a logo to complete the visual identity. Then came a newsletter to keep everyone informed—the Quill—Quick Updates for Independent Lifelong Learners. And a tagline to capture the essence of this new program: “Come for the courses. Stay for the friends!”

The technology part of LLAIC’s identity took a bit more doing, starting with a website. That burden fell to the few technically skilled founders who had a high level of computer proficiency. They were able to create a website and search for registration software that satisfied the group’s needs: course registration needed to be first-come, first-served with immediate acknowledgement, rather than a labor-intensive lottery system; direct payment with a credit card; and the database had to be structured by semesters and courses.

### **Searching for a home**

Perhaps the greatest challenge has been to find a suitable host facility for an organization that has very specific requirements, namely space for classes, a large space for communal gatherings and plenty of parking.

The founders explored several towns in the MetroWest area, looking for space to lease. It quickly became apparent that the only potential spaces with classrooms and larger meeting rooms were in local churches and synagogues.

Temple Beth Elohim in Wellesley agreed to be the first host but after a couple of years needed space for their early childhood program. The group moved to St. Demetrios in Weston, then to Temple Shir Tikva in Wayland. LLAIC is presently happily housed in Temple Shalom in West Newton.

### **Challenges met and overcome**

Not surprisingly, with the growing “senior” population in the US, there is a lot of competition for older people with an interest in learning (and teaching). Other lifelong learning programs, senior living communities, town councils on aging, libraries, and various civic groups have been competing for this demographic. But LLAIC has been different from the start because of its interest in fostering both intellectual and social activities. The program has always offered a gathering place (dubbed the Schmooze Room)

to congregate before and after class, have a cup of coffee with friends or catch up on a growing list of books to read and films to watch. Like other groups, LLAIC offers affinity groups, including drop-in book, film, and current affairs discussions, foreign language groups and “Let’s Go” outings throughout the region. In addition to tapping the considerable knowledge base of its membership for dozens of courses each year, LLAIC has taken advantage of experts available through TED talks, or other carefully curated online videos, as well as their unique programs such as “LLAIC Loves Art” and “Let’s Talk.” All these ancillary programs are open to the membership free of extra charge.

In addition to two formal semesters of class, Fall and Spring, LLAIC sponsors luncheon programs, summer and winter sessions. When COVID came along, LLAIC took it in stride, becoming Zoom-friendly almost overnight. Today members gather both in person and online. In fact, some members access only the extra-curricular activities. Continuing Zoom offerings enable members who have relocated or snowbirds to continue to participate and keep connected to friends they know from past classes. LLAIC has members from Nashville to Toronto!

### **A kid in a candy store**

From the beginning, LLAIC has provided a changing curriculum of courses as well as opportunities to meet a vibrant and interesting group of people. Its success is affirmed by the many enthusiastic endorsements offered by new members as well as those who have been with LLAIC from the beginning.

One new member enthused, “When I went to the website to find out more about LLAIC and looked at the course offerings, I felt like a kid in a candy store!”

Another long-term course leader expressed a common sentiment, “As a former teacher who loved what I did, getting to lead classes with people who want really to learn is a pleasure.”

Another member described an unexpected boon, “My mother-in-law, when she was about 70, told me that one doesn’t make new friends at that age. She was so wrong. Through the years I have made such dear friends and close acquaintances at LLAIC. They have enriched my life.”

One long-time member told of growing up without the opportunity for much formal education. He spoke of working hard, raising a family and being successful. Now he had the opportunity to get something he had missed, “You guys (LLAIC) are now giving me the university and that education late in life. I take advantage of as much as I can, and I love it.”

To celebrate the past ten years and kick-start the next decade, LLAIC will be hosting an anniversary celebration to honor its founders: Richard and Mary Mansfield, Joel and Jane Kamer, Peter Schmidt, Mike Segal, Joe Bongiardina, Phyllis Cohen; and its late founders Alorie Parkhill, Neil Bernstein, and Lois Silver. LLAIC will hopefully continue to offer seniors the opportunity to “Come for the courses. Stay for the friends!” for another ten years.