



Lifelong learning institute draws hundreds back to school



PHOTO SUPPLIED BY THE OSHER LIFELONG LEARNING INSTITUTE

Participants in the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute take a walking tour of the Five Points neighborhood in New York City. The tour was organized by undergraduates in Urban and Community Studies at the Waterbury Campus.

BY SHERRY FISHER

When retiree Dawn Horgan heard that an adult learning program was being offered at UConn's Waterbury campus, she thought she'd "give it a whirl." Now she's hooked.

"The people I met and the programs presented have revolutionized my life," says Horgan, who lives in Waterbury. "I can't say enough great things about it."

Horgan is one of more than 300 retired and semi-retired adults from around the state who take courses and enjoy other learning experiences through the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI)

at the Waterbury Campus. Participants choose from 32 non-credit courses in areas including the arts, computers, culture and language, health and wellness, and history. Classes, which run 1½ hours, are offered on Fridays. The average class size is about 25.

Membership of the Institute costs \$60 a year, and individual courses, which run for four to eight weeks, are \$25. A lunchtime lecture series called "OLLI Café" is offered, along with special events.

"The Institute adds a new dimension to what is already a vibrant campus," says Bill Pizzuto, director of the Waterbury campus.

"It brings older adults, with their intellect and experience, together to learn. It's about the joy of learning."

He adds, "I'm so proud of the Institute. It has brought so much to people's lives."

There are 120 Osher Institutes around the country. The Institute at Waterbury is the first and only one in Connecticut.

Brian Chapman, director of the program, says it has grown in both participants and courses since it was launched last year.

"The Bernard Osher Foundation expected us to have 100 students by the end of the first grant cycle,"

he says. "We had 308 participants. I think that speaks to the needs and the interests of retired and semi-retired individuals. They have an undying desire to be engaged in learning." Course offerings have tripled.

Chapman says the classes are "very discussion based. Many times the participants have as much to say as the instructors, because they've had these grand life experiences. There's a wealth of information going back and forth."

Ninety percent of course instructors are retirees. "They're often not teachers by trade," Chapman says, "but have avocations that they're passionate about. For instance, Dr. Ray Sullivan, a retired surgeon from Waterbury, teaches a course on New England Puritanism. He has written two books."

Horgan says she has been "enchanted" by the program.

"I never went to college," she says. "I married very young. I had three children. I've been working my whole life. I've continued to learn on my own, and I've done a lot of reading. Now I can take courses where there's no tests, no credit, no pressure — nothing but fun and learning."

"We're all learning from each other," she says. "The teachers and students are all equal. I've met some wonderful people."

Horgan is taking a course this semester on Henry VIII — "one of my favorite people in history"

— and has taken courses in Chinese medicine, Queens of Europe and Russia, and The Color of the Orchestra.

The course on the orchestra was presented by the Waterbury Symphony. "They gave an amazing introduction to the orchestra, explaining the beginnings," Horgan says. "Then they presented a concert, and my daughter and granddaughter and I went. It was our first symphony with three generations together."

Undergraduates in the Urban and Community Studies Program at Waterbury and OLLI participants have been spending time together. They learned about the Five Points neighborhood in New York, watched a film together, and traveled to New York City by bus on a Saturday. The urban studies students designed a walking tour for the OLLI members, and led them on the tour.

"They adopted us, visited with us, and watched out for us in New York," says Betty Kenyon, a retiree from Oakville.

OLLI members, in turn, sponsored a snack table with bagels, candy and cookies for students during final exam week in December.

Kenyon, who took courses in conversational Italian, and Rome and Venice, says: "It's a lovely experience for older people. It puts some excitement into your life again. I am absolutely thrilled."