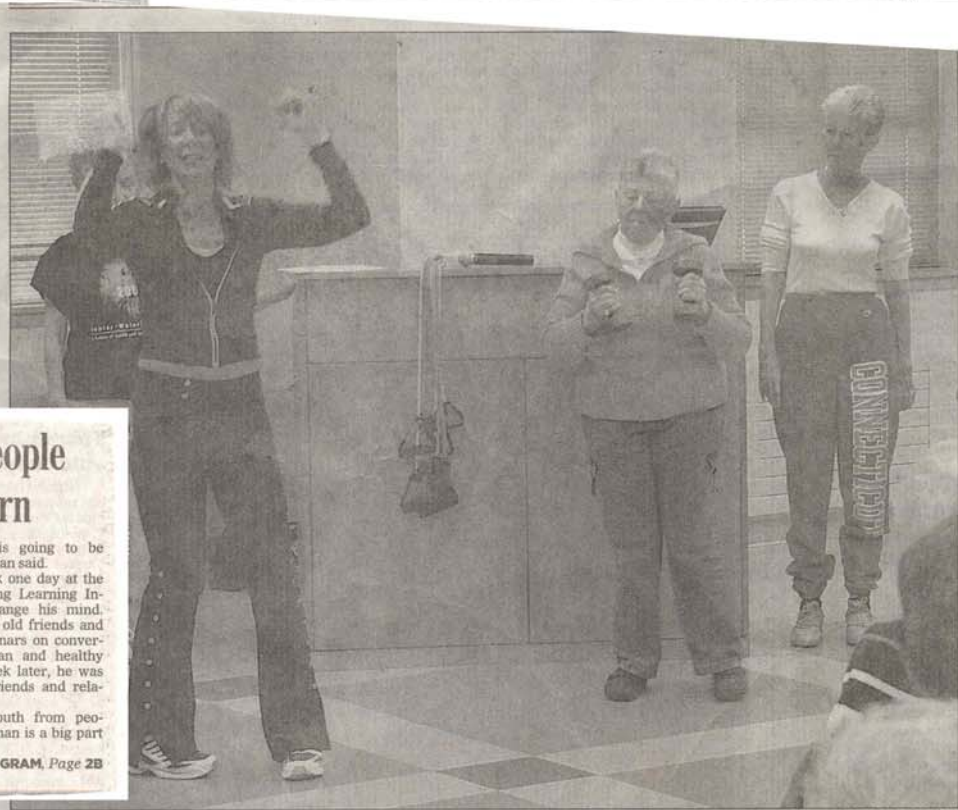


Greater Waterbury



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Fitness instructor Mary Henderson works with participants in the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the downtown University of Connecticut campus in Waterbury in November.

Program includes people who just want to learn

BY MICHAEL PUFFER
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

WATERBURY — Ray Brennan, a 68-year-old retired car salesman from Middlebury, wasn't exactly enthusiastic when his wife signed the couple up for a new adult learning program at the downtown Waterbury campus of the University of Connecticut. "I thought maybe this would be stale and the kind of thing where you're thinking

"When is this going to be over?" Brennan said.

It only took one day at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute to change his mind. Brennan met old friends and enjoyed seminars on conversational Italian and healthy eating. A week later, he was convincing friends and relatives to join.

Word-of-mouth from people like Brennan is a big part

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PROGRAM: A learning experience just for fun

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of the reason that the Osher program at UConn has exploded since last spring. About 100 students were expected in the first six months, and 308 have participated so far.

"We expected to grow, but certainly not at this pace," said Brian Chapman, director of the Osher program at UConn.

The program is named after its benefactor, Maine philanthropist Bernard Osher, whose foundation granted UConn \$100,000 to start the program. Just last week, UConn learned it has received another \$100,000 for next year. Eventually, local organizers hope for a \$1 million endowment.

Osher programs can be found at college campuses around the country. There are four in Massachusetts. Waterbury's is the first and only in Connecticut.

Enrollment costs \$60, and

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courses cost \$25 each. The program includes special events and weekly lunch seminars. Courses generally last four to eight Fridays, with offerings varying from Chinese medicine to Native American history.

Brennan and his wife, Mona, plan to sign up for two computer courses that begin in March.

Prior to finding an Osher pamphlet in the mail, Mona Brennan had considered going back to college, but felt she might not fit in with the younger students. Osher's programs don't offer credit toward a degree, only the

enjoyment of learning. There, she's with people her own age, and there's no pressure.

"I don't feel threatened and there's no homework and no marks," Mona Brennan said. "I like that best."

Ray Brennan enjoys the socializing. "The hour-and-a-half just flies by, and you wish you had more time," he said. "The bottom line is it's fun to go to, it's just plain old fun."

Courses are taught by volunteers, often retired as well.

"There's nothing like a live audience, people asking you questions. It's a great way to refine your own thinking," said

Leslie Lebl, a retired State Department diplomat from Woodbury. In March, she will teach her first Osher course, Radical Islam in Europe.

Samuel Beamon Sr., a retired Waterbury police lieutenant, will also join the Osher lecturing slate, teaching a course on African-American contributions to the U.S. military from the Revolutionary War forward.

He was sold on the program when he first went to visit Chapman to discuss the possibility of teaching. He walked into an award ceremony with 150 Osher participants in a big cafeteria.

"It was the enthusiasm of the audience, the smiles on the people's faces," Beamon said. "They looked like they were hungry to learn."

For information on the Osher program at UConn, visit www.waterbury.uconn.edu/osher or call (203) 236 9924.