

The Joy of Learning

Third agers of the Boomer generation are discovering new pathways to fulfillment after 50 in the no-pressure classrooms of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute.

BY KATHRYN JENSON WHITE



Those senior discounts for car rentals, movie tickets and restaurant tabs are nice, and so is that information-packed membership in AARP. Even more intriguing for the 50-and-older crowd living within a reasonable drive from the University of Oklahoma campus, however, is the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. The program is known affectionately to its more than 300 members as OLLI—pronounced “Ollie,” as in the rotund, smarter half of America’s quintessential comedy team, Laurel and Hardy. (More on those two wise fools at the end of this story.)

For a mere \$35 membership fee and \$5 per session, anyone at the half-century mark or beyond can become an “adult learner” and attend one of OLLI’s Mornings with the Professor. These 90-minute lectures by University faculty members range from the pretty predictable for this demographic—“Retirement Law and Policy”—to the beautifully surprising—“Irish Music Appreciation.” OLLI members also can pay a \$30 fee to attend a Senior Seminar, a weekly, two-hour class that can meet for up to six sessions. For that same fee, they can take an Elderlearn half-day seminar with continental breakfast provided.

“It’s almost become a way of life for some people,” says Tom McConnell, a member of the OLLI Steering Committee and dedicated program participant since its beginning in 2006. “I thought we’d see people come and go, but very few go. There’s a core of people who—no matter what’s being offered—if they have the free time, they’ll take it. It’s fun and satisfying. You feel better when you’re learning something.”

continued



Robert Taylor

Nancy Bluemel, left, Texas Woman’s University librarian, joins OU librarian Rhonda Harris Taylor for OLLI spring course, “You Are What You Eat.”

McConnell, who retired in 2006 as associate superintendent and legal counsel for Metro Tech, has both an undergraduate and a law degree from OU.

OU's OLLI, run through University Outreach by program administrator Chris Elliott and program coordinator Holly Mills, is part of a more than 120-university network of OLLIs around the country, all funded by the Osher Foundation. The first was established at the University of Southern Maine in 2001. Bernard Osher, a Maine native, responded to the success of SMU's effort and a second iteration at Sonoma State University in California by creating a program in which those invited to join the OLLI network could receive up to three annual \$100,000 grants to develop their own Lifelong Learning Institutes. At the end of the third year, if membership reaches 500, a program is eligible for a \$1 million endowment. In its first year, OU's OLLI drew more than 180 members, then 346 at the end of its second. Moving into its third year of annual funding, OU is aiming for the magical 500 mark.

"Everyone wins in this program," Elliott says. "The participants benefit from both the social and educational aspects. The faculty benefit from being able to focus on their passions and having a group of people dedicated to learning about them. The University benefits by involving a demographic in campus life it might not otherwise reach and by being a good citizen of the community by offering this service. It involves alumni, former faculty and staff who want to keep their ties to the university and others who, now that they have time to do so, want to learn for the sheer joy of learning, no matter where they went to school or for how long."

Instrumental in bringing the program to OU was Jerry Jerman, director of development in University Outreach. Four years ago, he attended a conference on continuing education and heard administrators talk about their OLLI experiences. In 2006, he and Elliott were invited to apply, given that the quality program of continuing education OU already offered seemed to be in sync with the OLLI mission.

"We are an educational enterprise, and we don't turn off the mission when someone turns 23," Jerman says. "We want to keep people engaged in learning. I see great potential for expansion as healthy retirees look for activities to keep their minds active and to have fun. They aren't intimidated by a college campus; they are at home in classrooms. I teach in the program, and it's so satisfying that I'd do it full-time if I could. This semester I'm teaching 'Pure Hitch: The Genius of Alfred Hitchcock.' We're all in the same age group, and the discussions are invigorating."

Twice each year, Elliott puts out the call for Mornings with the Professor and Senior Seminar course proposals to be offered during fall and spring semesters. In 2009, he offered the first summer semester. He now receives so many proposals that the steering committee has to turn down a significant number of proposals. Time and space limitations keep the number at approximately eight of the two-hour lectures and 16 seminars. Because, like Jerman, faculty members enjoy teaching to peo-



Kathryn Jenson White

Instructor Karyn Gilman, left, demonstrates her skill for Erna MacDonell in her popular OLLI course on the art of calligraphy.

ple with rich historical knowledge and an inherent excitement about attending the class, the Steering Committee has limited each applicant to one seminar a semester to allow as many as possible to have the experience. Without the pressure of working for a grade or the time requirements of producing assignments or studying for an exam, OLLI seems to have touched the Platonic ideal of education: learning for learning's sake. Ultimately, the program might better be named UU, Utopian University.

The number of those with the age potential to enroll in OLLI nationally is, of course, defined by the numbers of those categorized as Boomers, those 78 million or so born between 1946 and 1964 reaching 50 at the rate of somewhere between 3.5 million and over 4 million a year in the United States alone. The U.S. Census Bureau figures say that those born in 1959 and 1960, who turn 50 and become OLLI eligible this year and next, number about 4.5 million. AARP frequently publishes stories about "third stage education," what comes after young and middle but before old. In significant numbers, Boomers are returning to school to enrich their lives and, in some cases, begin new careers.

From community colleges to the Ivy Leagues, administrators are taking note. On February 5, 2009, AARP.com published a story titled "Harvard Tests a Boomer School," which carried the subhead, "For socially conscious baby boomers who've topped



Robert Taylor

Participants discuss the novels of Jane Austen in sessions led by Kristina Booker, left, here welcoming OLLI coordinator Holly Mills and program administrator Chris Elliott to her class.



Robert Taylor

Nathan Brown, seated center, offers a change of scene to members of his class, "Poetry for People Who Don't Like Poetry," by inviting them to his home. From left are David Anderson, J.C. Oehlschlager, Rae Stuart, Brown, Robert McDonald and Wilma Collett Rachal.

out in one career, midlife education is a gateway to more meaningful work." OLLI members may not be scouting a new career, but they're definitely seeking more satisfying and meaningful lives.

Participants describing their classroom experiences—some of whom enroll in five or six seminars each semester—make clear that these retired or semi-retired but still very busy people consider OLLI a significant life enrichment.

"Obviously, there are wonderful opportunities available when you live in a University community, and OLLI is a prime one," says Faith Killam, who retired from OU eight years ago as support staff for the Honors College dean. During the last year, she took two seminars taught by Shad Satterthwaite, who has served as a faculty member in the political science department and assistant to OU President David Boren and is now the University's equal opportunity officer.

"I took 'Road to the White House' the spring the primaries were taking place and 'Media and Politics' in spring 2009. I could read all I wanted to about the election and watch the cable interview shows, but having lived in the University community for 60 years, that's not enough for me. There's something about being in a classroom and having the professor there and sharing the learning experience with 35 other people. That's a lot more fun and a very different thing from watching C-Span."

Satterthwaite's courses are always full—and full of excitement. The class was so engaged at the end of "Road to the White House" that its members

asked Satterthwaite for an encore: a post-seminar meeting after the election.

"That was great fun," Satterthwaite says. "We hadn't met for months, so everyone had a lot to say during this postmortem. I talked a bit about the demographics of voting, but everyone had good things to say. I think most faculty members have this great experience teaching in OLLI. Many of my students had more experiential knowledge than I did. In my 'Media and Politics' class, I had two reporters. One of them had covered George Wallace's campaigns and was present when the assassination attempt took place. I can't top that. Life experiences in this group are remarkable and rich."

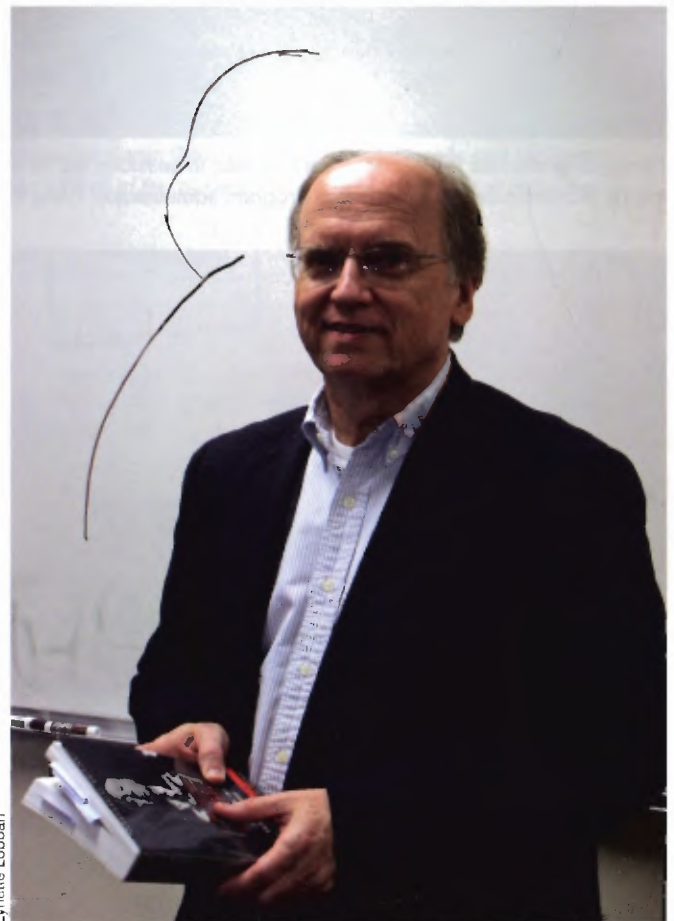
Academics who teach are not the only ones mining the riches of third agers engaged in continuing education; academics who do research are, as well. From the OLLI National Resource Center at the University of Southern Maine comes the annual *LLI Review*, which features among other things, scholarly research in the area. In its 2006 issue, an article titled, "Changing Life Options: Uncovering the Riches of the Third Age," cites research and statistics showing that life expectancy has increased from about 47 in 1900 to about 77 in 2000. What to do with this "30-year life bonus" is the question. OLLI is part of the answer.

"If we follow the usual decrement model of aging, the extra time could be spent experiencing decline, degeneration, disabilities, debilitation, disease, dependency, deterioration, and decrepitude — the dreadful D words that have defined usual aging up until now," writes article author William A. Sadler, director of research for the Center for Third Age Leadership and author of several books on life and learning after 50. "But suppose individuals change course in midlife and insert that bonus into the middle of their lives, rather than saving it until the end. In fact, we're already seeing that begin to happen, with some people experiencing vitality, growth, productivity and greater satisfaction by delaying advanced aging with personal skills of growth and renewal."

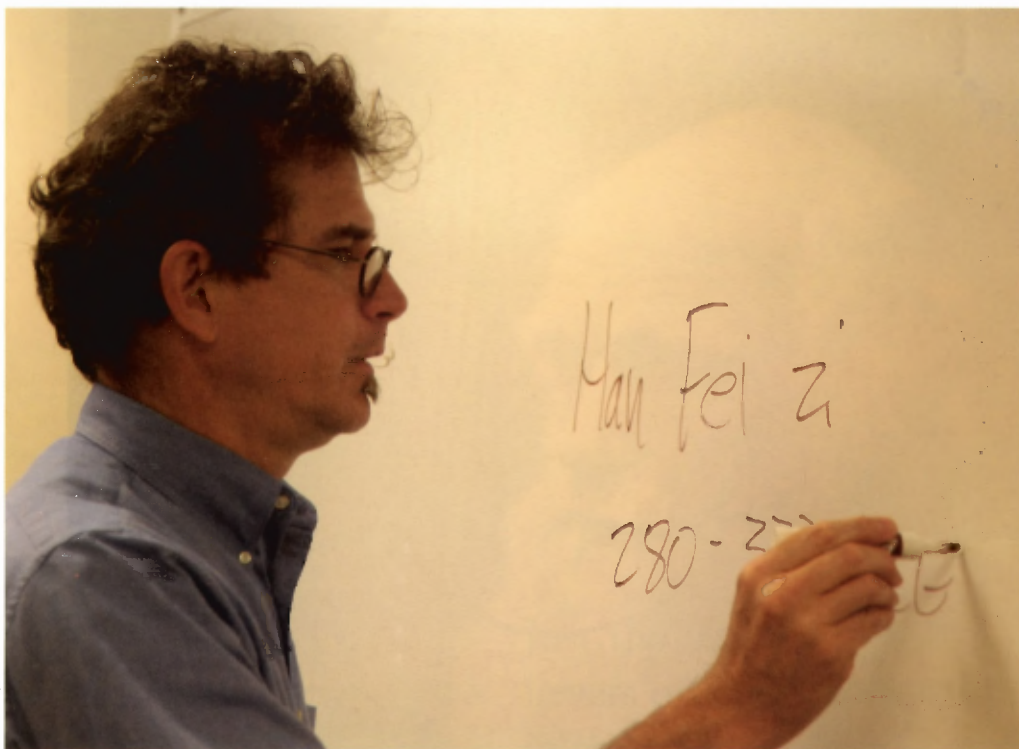
Norman resident Ann Ryan, who takes five or six OLLI courses each semester, retired as vice president commercial loan officer from BancFirst in 1991 and then worked nearly a decade as a self-employed landscape designer. Her need to know continues to grow. In spring 2009 alone, she took "The Films of Errol Morris," "Introduction to Calligraphy," "Chinese Thought and Culture in the Age of Confucius," "Counter-Terrorism and Intelligence" and "Historical



The Osher Lifelong Learning Institute has experienced a steadily increasing enrollment of over-50s, nearly 350 last year alone. Faculty line up for the privilege of teaching their special interests to older students with the leisure time, desire and enthusiasm for learning something new.



Jerry Jerman, who played a pivotal role in bringing the OLLI program to OU, has turned his love of movies into a series of classes for fellow enthusiasts. During the spring semester, he offered "Pure Hitch: The Genius of Alfred Hitchcock."



The current fascination with everything Chinese draws a dedicated class of “third agers” to the lectures of Alan Atkinson as he explores “Chinese Thought and Culture in the Age of Confucius.”

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Developments in Landscape Architecture.”

“There are exchanges; there are discussions,” she says. “I like the whole scenario of an expert telling me something—and it’s a forced discipline. I bought a geology book to take a for-credit geology class. Then the professor retired, and I thought, ‘I’ll just gradually read this on my own.’ Well, that didn’t happen. Then I found Ken Johnson in Elderlearn, and I take whatever he offers.” Johnson is a geologist emeritus from the Geological Survey.

One of the program’s most popular offerings is one that just celebrated its 10th anniversary. Before the OLLI designation, Rufus Fears—David Ross Boyd Professor of classics, among many other honors—led the more than 80 participants in the OU Book Club through a year of reading works of classic literature with a common theme. Two classes of 40-plus meet monthly, one in Norman and one at Full Circle Bookstore in Oklahoma City. In 2007-2008, the focus was, “life lessons from the Great Books with themes of love, patriotism and conquering the human spirit.” Norman resident J.C. Oehlschlager, who moved to Norman in 1975 to earn a master’s in clinical social work, just finished her second year in Fears’ seminar.

“Talk about challenging,” she says. “I am now the proud owner of four of his lecture series. I’ve given two as gifts, and I buy them for myself, as well. We’ve read the autobiography of Albert Schweitzer, *The Brothers Karamzov*, *Macbeth*, Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* and others. We try to read a book a month. He has amazing insight and knowledge to share.”

Oehlschlager calls “fascinating and also challenging” reli-

gious studies faculty member Barbara Boyd’s “Which Bible Do You Mean;” “incredible” music graduate student Anne-Valerie Brittan-Leibundgut’s “The Life and Work of W.A. Mozart;” and “inspiring” poet Nathan Brown’s “Poetry for People Who Don’t Like Poetry.” Elliott says these are common adjectives in participants’ evaluations of OLLI offerings.

“We really do try to offer something for every taste,” he says. “We have challenging courses, but also courses that are just fun to take. We have faculty from music, art, science, journalism and religion among many other disciplines. We want to offer the best, most varied slate of classes we can to the largest number of participants possible. We want it to be serious but fun.”

Fun is a word that comes up often as participants discuss their OLLI experiences. Third agers seem to be quite serious about their fun and to have quite a bit of fun being serious. That idea takes us back to Laurel and Hardy, as promised. In 1938’s *Block-Heads*, the two have an exchange featuring a “dreadful D word” Sadler does not list.

Stan: You remember how dumb I used to be?

Ollie: Yeah?

Stan: Well, I’m better now.



For information on course offerings and enrollment, call 405/325-3488 or visit the web site at www.lli.outreach.ou.edu.

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