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EPISODE NAME: Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes

Today on Across the Fence you're never too old to learn so we will be exploring opportunities offered through the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute of the University of Vermont. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us I am Judy Simpson.

From Newport to Brattleboro, UVM offers Vermonters ages 50 and up a series of unique learning opportunities. The programs and courses offered by the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute are designed to be intellectually stimulating and affordable in community settings throughout Vermont. To find out more I'm joined by Cathi Cody Hudson. Cathi is the Assistant Director of the Osher Institutes. Welcome and thanks for being with us.

Cathi.: Thank you for having me.

Judy.: Give us a little background about the Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes?

Cathi.: First of all we'd like to refer to them affectionately as OLLIs. That stands for Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. We're part of a national organization of 117 OLLI's around the country. We were established by Bernard and Barbro Osher in California. Our first OLLI at UVM was established in Rutland in 2003. We received grant money from the national foundation to establish our statewide sites. We have eight around the state and we have a campus site as well.

Judy.: What's really the goal of this program?

Cathi.: It's to provide intellectually stimulating educational opportunities aimed at the 50 plus audience.

Judy.: You mentioned that we have sites all over the state. Where are they?
Cathi.: They are in Newport, we have a site in St. Albans and St. Johnsbury, Central Vermont which is based out of Montpelier, and we have one in Lamoille, the UVM campus in Burlington, Springfield, Brattleboro and Rutland.

Judy.: How do the sites work you mentioned their membership drive and why is that so important?

Cathi.: Really the sites particularly around the state could not be in existence if we didn't have our volunteers and members. The sites provide educational opportunities for the interest of people in those areas. Our members get involved with everything from running the programs - from deciding what instructors they want to have, what kind of topic areas, to making sure that the program runs; from making refreshments if they want that, to seeking out sponsors, to enlisting new members and marketing, mailing out brochures. It becomes a community run organization and the interest of the members really comes forth.

Judy.: So what are some of the things that members learn?

Cathi.: We have lots of interesting topic areas in the arts and literature and philosophy, travel, food, film and media and just a variety of different topics that are offered. Here you can see some samples of lectures that we've had around the state recently. They were all offered this past fall in different sites. Nature and artifice in architecture that was actually offered in Brattleboro. The roaring twenties was a really interesting lecture offered in Central Vermont. Frida Kahlo and the Mexican muralists was offered in Lamoille and the history of TV in Vermont was actually offered by Marselis Parsons in Newport.

Judy.: Exciting. Tell me a little bit about more - this happens all year long or mostly these courses are in the wintertime?

Cathi.: For the state wide programs they run 9 to 12 lectures each semester in the fall and in the spring. They run for about an hour and a half to 2 hours long once a week and they're held in local community buildings - whether they are in a local library or a town hall and there's Q&A after the lecture and oftentimes there is a little social gathering too.

Judy.: Some of the other samples of statewide lecture topics we can talk about - sort of never ending ideas.

Cathi.: Yes there are. The Vermont civil war history. Vermont history is a really popular topic with our 50 plus audience around the state and that was offered in Rutland recently by Howard Coffin. Discovering Black Vermont was offered in St. Albans this past fall and the work of Frank Lloyd Wright after 1932 was offered in Springfield. Then Capture Severe Weather Through Photos lecture - it was wonderful by meteorologist Chris Bouchard and that was offered in St. Johnsbury.
Judy.: Let's talk a little bit about the whole aspect of history. You said that's really popular. There so many sites around Vermont and around us everywhere that still exist today that people can go to and see.

Cathi.: Yes that's true. Anything related to Vermont's history have been topics that our statewide sites particularly like.

Judy.: Tell me a little bit about how the membership works?

Cathi.: People sign up to be a member and they can attend lectures. There's 9 to 12 lectures a semester. The rate is 35 to 40 dollars a semester. There's also the option to walk in as well and pay as you go if you don't think you're going to attend all of them. Of course we encourage people to sign up and be members because that's what counts for us in our community.

Judy.: So there are also OLLI courses on the UVM campus?

Cathi.: Yes there are. We established the OLLI on UVM campus in the summer of 2010. That was a little bit of an anomaly for our UVM OLLI in that we didn't have anything on the campus site. So we established that and those are short courses. Here's a list of some very popular courses that have been running since we started. Conversational French and the Spanish course, social networking, and essential digital photography. These are courses that run typically four weeks in length and they are about an hour and a half long. They meet once a week.

Judy.: And obviously topics that people are interested in as far as there's new technology coming out every day so trying to stay on top of it if you don't have a young person living with you at home to show you. It's really hard.

Cathi.: That's right those have been quite popular.

Judy.: There's also travel opportunities?

Cathi.: Yes there are. We're not just local. Last March we took a group of OLLI members to Oaxaca Mexico they spent a week there and were immersed in the food and culture of the region. That was a wonderful opportunity for people to visit Mexico. And this past fall I had the opportunity to go to France. We spent nine days there and again explored the culture, and the food in the region of Provence.

Judy.: Tell me a little bit about how these international trips comes out?

Cathi.: Oftentimes it's an instructor that's interested in it. The France trip our French teacher Bern Terry has the connection in that region so he put this trip together. He gave us a proposal for it and that's how it came about.

Judy.: Explain why someone 50 are older would want to become a member?
Cathi.: That's a really good question. There are studies and much has been done in brain research recognizing that staying mentally and socially active are good strategies to help maintain our brain health as we age. Also being involved in meaningful work and volunteering are good complements to better health and mental and physical activities. Our OLLI programs offer all of that. You're actively learning something new if you come to our programs, you have an opportunity to volunteer and be engaged in what your community is going to offer for educational programs, and you're part of the social network and the gathering.

Judy.: I think the whole idea of retirement has really changed over the years as far as what people think of when they think of retirement.

Cathi.: Yes I think you right. I think people want to continue to learn and explore and stay engaged.

Judy.: Tell me a little bit about whom teaches some of these programs?

Cathi.: Certainly. We call upon the university resources and have used a lot of our current and retired faculty at the University of Vermont and many of them teach because they love to continue to teach and they often give the gift of their time. I think they get a lot back from this audience as it's a wonderful exchange of ideas. We also have community experts that teach. People who are experts in different fields – writers, artists, meteorologists and television station directors, for example, that have come and talked and presented for us. Then also there are community members, OLLI members that have an expertise in a topic area they'd like to share. So we call that peer-to-peer learning.

Judy.: There's also cooking classes?

Cathi.: Yes there are. We have some on campus coming up this spring. We have Indian cooking. The class is going to be starting this spring, then we also have slow yoga. We have activity classes as well on campus.

Judy.: Do you find that people are interested not only learning in an academic setting but also the hands on kind of thing?

Cathi.: Yes those are popular. Another (I forgot to mention) of our travel courses that people really enjoy and fills up every time is a daylong excursion to Montreal to tour the Jean Talon market. We've offered that every summer and fall and it fills up immediately.

Judy.: What would that trip entail?

Cathi.: We rent vans and drive people to Montreal and then we go to the market and walk around. It's led by a facilitator that knows the market. Our director has gone before and joined our members. They walk around to get a sense of what's at the market and then people are free to roam and shop.
Judy.: How can someone find out more about becoming a member? What should they do?

Cathi.: We have a wonderful web site that has all of our information. They can find out how to become a member, what kind of courses they might be interested in signing up for and the web site is learn.uvm.edu/olli. If you prefer to talk to a live person you can call our toll free number at 1-800-639-3210. Or you can e-mail me directly at olli@uvm.edu.

Judy.: You travel around to sites. What are some of the things you discover when you travel?

Cathi.: I am so amazed at the wonderful community that OLLI provides to people and it's wonderful to see the engagement and the dialogue that happens at the lectures. I am so thankful for the volunteers that help put these programs on because without them our OLLI's would not be successful.

Judy.: Let's talk about some of the other things we talked about that are offered. There are history courses there are also writing courses which I thought was interesting. Why do you think people are interested in that?

Cathi.: A couple of courses that are interesting are the memoir writing which has become quite popular. People are interested in telling their story. This is the 50 plus audience. They've experienced a lot in their lives and they want to document that in some way. That has been one of our popular classes.

Judy.: What are some of the other ones people have gravitated towards or some of the more unusual ones perhaps?

Cathi.: Oh boy...

Judy.: I know there's one coming up that I was interested in which was all about mushrooms.

Cathi.: Yes that's an interesting class. I actually took that during one of the first semesters. Robert Resnick teaches that and he's a very exuberant and wonderful instructor. I believe in that class they will go out and forage for mushrooms. There will be some lecture in the classroom and then there will be cooking/field trip as well.

Judy.: It sounds almost as if there's limitless opportunities for learning depending on what people are interested in.

Cathi.: That's right. Members have a voice in what their programs will be in their local OLLI so we encourage members to get involved.

Judy.: You brought some pamphlets with you that illustrate that?
Cathi.: Yes. These are some of our edgier marketing materials that we have that are promoting our campus program really. These are members and I work with a woman that's skydiving here with their husband. And this is one of our cooking classes.

Judy.: Do think that some of the trends recently are what is driving these things as far as more interest in food and different kinds of food will spur Indian cooking class?

Cathi.: I think so yes and we're always looking for new ideas and opportunities to share what people want to learn so we love to hear from people.

Judy.: I mention technology there's several different courses that center around the technology whether it's digital photography of learning how to use a digital camera.

Cathi.: I actually took the digital photography class and it was really interesting. Even knowing how to get to post pictures on the Internet. I had not learned how to do that before. It's a hands on class and you get to learn. We have computers that people can work on their photos and take pictures around campus.

Judy.: Tell me a little bit about some of the other programs like this that exist. I know there's this one in Vermont but there are several across the country.

Cathi.: There are and the ones across the country - ours is unique in that we have the nine sites around the state of Vermont. Most of the other OLLI’s around the nation are based at their main campus. They typically work out of one site and at ours we felt that it's such a rural state that we wanted to reach out and our former director Debbie Worthley really went out into all of those communities and got volunteers to sign up and established the programs. It's been very successful. Not sure if I've mentioned we have 730 members right now and we do want to grow to be 1000 members. We're hoping that will happen in the next year or two. When we brought the campus site online we grew immediately. We have over 250 members for the campus site.

Judy.: In different individual sites across the state you mentioned there staffed by volunteers. They must be very committed?

Cathi.: They are very committed and dedicated. Many of the site leaders (and those are the folks I'm in contact with the most) -many of them have been with us since the start of their site and are wonderful volunteers. We meet together once a year. We have an annual meeting in a central location and it's an opportunity for all of the site leaders to share ideas and talk about instructors that they like, programs that work and do some brainstorming.

Judy.: And they swap ideas as far as what worked in that part of the state and other sites might be interested in doing?

Cathi.: Exactly there's a lot of rotating of instructors around the sites.
Judy.: Let's talk a little bit about membership and is there anything required of a member once they become a member.

Cathi.: Nothing's required.

Judy.: You can take as many courses or as few.

Cathi.: Yes you can. We have a few benefits to being a member. If you're a member of one of our statewide sites or EEE which is a program here in Burlington we have what's called a reciprocal attendance. So if I'm for instance a member of St. Albans OLLI and I see something interesting in Brattleboro or central Vermont I can simply go to that lecture and it's free because I have already paid my membership at St. Albans.

Judy.: Once again how can people find out more about this if they want to join?

Cathi.: They can go to our web site at learn.uvm.edu/olli, call our toll free number you see on the screen or e-mail me at olli@uvm.edu.

Judy.: At the very least you should go on the web site and check out some of the courses because there really is something for everyone.

Cathi.: I think that there is thank you.

Judy.: Very interesting thank you so much. That's our program for today I'm Judy Simpson we will see you again next time on Across the Fence.

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