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Gladly learning later in life
Academic program surpassing expectations

BY BRYNN MANDEL

REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

In front of a standing-room-only crowd of a few hundred Tuesday morning, speakers lobbed jokes about Howdy Doody and “bucket lists.”

To alternating raucous laughter and murmurs of recognition, they invoked the assassination of President Kennedy, Nixon’s resignation and Roy Rogers’ cowboy antics. Welcome to a school open house — only this isn’t any ordinary learning institution. Instead of shopping for trendy back-to-school clothes and Jonas Brothers-emblazoned backpacks, these students are selecting classes to supplement gardening or time with grandchildren. They attend, or will enroll in, the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Connecticut’s Waterbury branch.

The institute, one of 120 affiliated with colleges and universities in 49 states, offers classes targeted to those over 50 in everything from New England Puritanism to George Orwell.

Since its launch in spring 2007, the Waterbury-based program funded by a Maine philanthropist’s foundation has exceeded expectations. What started with 111 students and 11 classes has blossomed in its sixth semester this fall to 39 courses.

In six hours Tuesday, the program registered 125 participants. Enrollment is expected to top 500 this fall — a time that early estimates anticipated hav-

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A lecture on new Asian emperors at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute open house at the University of Connecticut's Waterbury branch Tuesday drew hundreds of people over 50 years old who are interested in taking courses at the nearly three-year-old institute.

CLASS: Brain food satisfies seniors

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ing closer to 300 students, said Brian Chapman, the local program's director. He explained OLLI, as the college-for-the-older- set is called, has consistently met and exceeded goals. Participants in the only program of its kind in Connecticut have hailed from 63 towns.

"I thought the program would be successful. I never thought it would be this successful," said William Pizzuto, director of UConn Waterbury.

He attributed the progress to the quality and range of courses offered and the dedication by those involved in OLLI — as well as a demand for these activities by active older adults.

Poised for endowment

If the popularity continues, the program funded by annual grants may get more permanent financial stability. It becomes eligible in 2010 for a \$1 million endowment that the Bernard Osher Foundation gives to programs that prove successful and sustainable.

If Tuesday's open house — with its wait list of 60 — is any indication, the program may be on its way to permanency. Before a sea of a few hundred silver, gray and brown- or blonde-by-the-box-haired heads, and a few balding ones, Penny O'Connell extolled the virtues of the program she has participated in as an instructor. The retired history teacher will present American History and Women of Power in History this fall.

Don't worry about truancy, she told current and potential students. And grades? Not a red marking pen in sight.

Rather, OLLI is a place of "smiling faces and people who look just like you," said O'Connell, invoking their shared memories of events and early TV characters.

"The most important characteristic we share is gray hair.

Some of you are not there yet.

We'll wait for you," she joked, adding, "This is Pilates for the brain, and it doesn't hurt."

'Good for my brain'

In addition to focusing about 80 percent of offerings in the liberal arts and sciences, the program aims to foster relationships. Frequently, lunchtime speakers supplement classes, and students gather with brown bag lunches around the East Main Street campus.

Susan Gray of Terryville signed up after attending an open house last year.

"It was like, 'Oh my gosh, this is what I need,'" the 54 year-old former chief financial officer said.

Five years earlier, a stroke left her unable to process information as she previously could.

But she said she knew stimulating her brain remained important in recovery.

"To go back to regular school would have been very difficult," she said, explaining she can't take notes, and the stress of grades and tests was not good for her. She has since taken classes in astronomy, on Abe Lincoln, and Chinese medicine. "It's a nice intellectual activity and it's good for my brain. It's a great social thing, too."

Delma Way calls herself "hooked" on OLLI. She saw a brochure for the program at the Palace Theater across the street three years ago, and has taken classes every semester since.

"It keeps the cobwebs out of the brain," said Way, a Watertown woman in her early 70s.

Echoed John Fontaine, a 67-year-old retired teacher from Waterbury, “It’s encouraging that that level of learning didn’t end when we retired.”

Fontaine planned to enroll in beginner Italian, undaunted by the stereotype that languages become increasingly harder to pick up as we age.

“I have always loved languages,” he said, rattling off a list of other tongues he speaks.

“I might just have to work a little harder.”

His friend, Bob Grady, 77, also a retired teacher, chimed that he appreciated classes filled with students who wanted, rather than had, to be there. “Here, people bring their heads to the class,” said Grady, of Watertown.

Learning also at NVCC

OLLI is not the only outlet for recreational or non-credit learning, though the Osher program differentiates itself by focusing on liberal arts and sciences while availing participants of college resources.

Across town, Naugatuck Valley Community College offers non-credit courses that it’s been publicizing in a series of ads touting “lifelong learning.”

Instruction there encompasses everything from baking to tai chi, but what’s really growing there, said Laurie Hornbecker, who oversees noncredit classes, are courses that offer work force training in everything from jewelry making to nursing: “We’re trying to be of interest to lots of populations.”

What class would you be interested in? Post opinions on this story at www.rep-am.com.



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Dr. George T. Haley lectures on New Asian Emperors at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute open house at UConn-Waterbury on Tuesday.