

OLLI Network...Strength in Numbers

By David Langdon

As a member of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of North Carolina Asheville, you are one of over 170,000 members nationwide who attend one of 124 Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes, located in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. That fact gives an idea of the scope of the Osher Network, consisting of the Bernard Osher Foundation and the continuing work of the Osher National Resource Center. Each OLLI, connected to a college or university, has as its goal providing lifelong learning opportunities for seniors 50 or over in their “second half of life.”

Bernard Osher began building the OLLI network around 2001 when he noticed alums of his University of Southern Maine actively learning “for the fun of it” at the USM Senior College. Mr. Osher sought out and began to help fund various programs of lifelong learning around the country, many of them connected to colleges and universities. Locally our OLLI was originally called the North Carolina Center for Creative Retirement but changed its name with Osher’s 2 million dollar endowment in 2015. The Osher Foundation also funds 9 integrated medicine programs at prestigious schools, and his foundation supports a scholars and fellows scholarship program for undergrads at 250 colleges and universities around the country. In short, Mr. Osher is dedicated to education.

The Osher National Resource Center (NRC) is the support arm of the Osher Foundation for the 124 individual OLLIs. NRC Executive Director Steve Thaxton says, “Like the Osher Foundation, we are not a governing unit nor are we prescriptive.” With so many different OLLI’s the NRC prefers individual autonomy in each of their operations. Steve’s task is to help the NRC connect, collaborate, consult and celebrate lifelong learning with each institute.

The NRC, housed at Northwestern University near Chicago, provides guidance for the extremely diverse offerings of each independent program. Topics for lifelong learning can range from college and university academic courses to travel and field trip offerings, even hiking and dancing. The NRC is currently investigating new teaching concepts to offer to OLLI’s for learning in the future. Steve says, “the learning technologies of online videoconferencing are becoming popular at many OLLIs.” These new ideas help learners with busy lives who might be open to evening or weekend classes or workshops. Videoconferencing can also be an answer to the overcrowding of highly subscribed courses.

Our Asheville OLLI at the University of North Carolina is tightly connected to the NRC. Every 18 months Executive Director Catherine Frank and the chairperson of the OLLI

Steering Council attend a national conference. This meeting is a forum of ideas for other OLLIs to share and take back to strengthen their individual programs.

More information about the Osher Foundation and its National Resource Center is available on our OLLI Asheville website under “About OLLI – Osher Information,” on the Bernard Osher display in our lobby and through the links to Osher Foundation in the Sunday *OLLI Observer* E-newsletter.