



Meet ... Natalie Conklin

OLLI South
Facilitator

Issue 3 • Nov. 2025

Snapshot

- Natalie's Pastimes -

- ☐ 5280 Senior Chorale
- ☐ Book Clubs
- ☐ Wine Club
- ☐ Walking Murphy, her Wheaton Terrier/Havanese mix dog
- ☐ Mahjong
- ☐ Doing Triathlons

Wonder-full: The Art of Teaching, Learning, Living

"I am a wonderer," Natalie Conklin likes to say — and it's true in every sense.

From childhood roots outside New York City, to the ocean off Long Island as a child, to exploring the sights and sounds of Central Park and Rockefeller Center, to a passion for Broadway, to a career teaching in classrooms across America, Natalie has always asked: What else is there to learn?

From childhood, "The water has just always been my thing. We were at the ocean all the time, swimming, body surfing, fishing and crabbing. Then, as I got older in college, I was in what they called synchronized swimming, one of the most strenuous sports there is."

Her parents encouraged independence and exploration, allowing her to find her own way and pursue her interests, while "feeling loved, protected, and fully supported." Today her family all live in Florida. Natalie is the "outlier," after taking the long route to Colorado.

First, she obtained three college degrees: Human Development and Family Studies and Communication Arts (BS) from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York; Early Childhood Education (MA) from Rollins College in Florida, and Special Education (MS) from California Lutheran University. She also holds National Board Certification in Early Childhood Education.

While at Cornell, she wondered what it might be like to live among 140 international students — and so she did. Curiosity also led her to an internship at Children's Television Workshop, the producer of "Sesame Street."

While living in Florida, she worked as a waitress, a bookstore clerk, and a host at Walt Disney World's Polynesian Village Hotel.

After she married, they moved to California for seven years before moving to Denver in 1982 where she raised her three sons, Peter, Tom, and Matt. In retirement, she relishes traveling to visit them in New York City, Alabama, New Mexico, and Alaska where they have lived.

She began her eclectic career in California teaching in classrooms from preschool to secondary special education, back to the K-2 classroom, to reading recovery, to being a media specialist. She finds joy in the creativity and variety that teaching offers.

"My greatest joy came from children who said that I made learning fun.... Kids don't remember what you taught them. They remember how you made them feel. I hope I made them all feel good about themselves, valued, and loved."

Yet, some of her teaching assignments were not what you would expect. "I taught at a high school special ed program...in a school that took on kids through the Department of Corrections. This was their last chance before they ended up in locked facilities."

"At first, when I got the job, I thought...what am I doing? I really wanted to teach little ones. Then I realized quickly, 'These kids are just like my preschoolers. They want to be loved, they want attention, they want their gifts honored.'"

After becoming a single parent, she took a job at Eastridge Elementary, a Title 1 school with a multi-cultural student population of immigrants and refugees from Somalia, Russia, Bangladesh and elsewhere. At one point, 52 different languages echoed in the halls.

On her retirement, the father of a 2nd grade Muslim student sent her a

letter of appreciation she values greatly. He wrote, "I wish I had a new way to say thank you, a way that would really express how much your kindness has meant to Muhammed and our family," showing why she was once named her school's "Teacher of the Year."

She joined OLLI 11 years ago and began facilitating quickly, becoming known for the out-of-the-box courses she offers, often related to music or theater.

Although she had enjoyed reading and history in her own education, she soon realized, "I am more right-brained. I love art and music. It is not so much that I'm a painter, singer, or actor, but that I just love studying anything to do with the arts. To this day I realize that is what I have taught in OLLI."

Natalie most enjoys the preparation phase and getting excited by all the new information and having the opportunity to share that. She most values the "curiosity and involvement" of adult learners, and "the feeling they have that they learned something they didn't know before so that they become wonderers too."

For members contemplating facilitating, she encourages them to think outside of the careers they had. "There are things that I've taught that I never thought in a million years that I'd be teaching, but I see something on TV, or I'll read a book, and find something interesting. I start researching — that's the fun part — and go down a rabbit hole." Suddenly, she has found her next new course. "You don't have to be an expert," she added. "Just be passionate about your subject."

"The best learning begins with the simple phrase: I wonder."

Writing and Design - Sheila Jones

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- Natalie's -
Outside-the-Box
OLLI CLASSES

- Learning History Through Smithsonian Artifacts
- Magic of Jim Henson and Puppetry
- The Amazing History of Toys and Games
- Cabinet of Curiosities
- Broadway from the Golden Age to Today
- Animals in Our Lives
- The Museum of Lost Art
- Bustles to Bellbottoms (Fashion and Fads)
- Gotta Dance: Dance Genres Around the World

Natalie, a Diamond facilitator, has facilitated or co-facilitated 25 courses, volunteered on committees, and co-hosts the OLLI South Noon Show.

Surprising Fact:

Natalie collects sand from everywhere she travels and shells she uses for crafts.

