



Never Stop Learning

THE ONGOING GIFTS OF BELFAST SENIOR COLLEGE

By Shelagh Talbot

Waldo County is beautiful—a coastal area with much to do and enjoy, and for almost 20 years Belfast Senior College has been a vibrant part of that landscape. The college was created in 2001 by a group of Belfast-area residents and leaders along with Dr. Jim Patterson, director of the newly opened Hutchinson Center—part of the University of Maine system. This center was built with the idea of creating outreach for the university and “serving as an educational and cultural hub for the mid-coast community,” according to their website. Belfast Senior College is a perfect fit.

The college opened its doors modestly enough, with one course on journal writing being offered during the summer of 2001. By autumn, the college’s first autumn semester was filled with a variety of 14 courses. They’ve grown exponentially ever since.

According to notes on their history, by the winter of 2005 “a total of 188 courses had been offered, taught by 64 different instructors.” The most frequently offered courses were in history (15 classes), literature (14), religion/philosophy (12), and computers (11), painting/photography, languages, sciences, and finances. Among course offerings that defy categorization have been wine, comedy, bicycling, navigation, local politics, aging, genealogy, and antiques.

Several instructors came from teaching careers at high schools and colleges, while others, including musicians, artists, and businessmen have given of their time and talent to enrich the students at the college. Belfast Senior College does not pay their faculty, but they “get to choose exactly what they want to teach, unhampered by the dictates of a larger curriculum.”

PHOTOS: COURTESY BELFAST SENIOR COLLEGE

Also, they “do not have to give tests, grade papers, give grades, or confer credit. Most of all, perhaps, they get to teach students who have had rich life experiences and who are motivated purely by the desire to learn.” It’s a win for teachers, and a win for the seniors who flock to their classes.

Cathy Bradbury, who had worked with Dr. Fred Hutchinson for many years, became involved with the senior college early on. “We’re so excited about forming this opportunity for seniors in the area,” she said. “The Hutchinson Center is huge, with an open atrium and corridors on left and right. It’s the perfect venue for Belfast Senior College and brings an older group of people together under the best of circumstances.”

Pat Griffith, former college president, said the college was “a moving, functioning thing.” She had moved to Belfast in late 2002 and heard about the school. “I showed up at the door of the Hutchinson Center one day and said I wanted to join,” she smiled. She was enthusiastic from the start. “I went to a class being offered during the break and found a bunch of

people that I’d met recently at church. Suddenly they were coming up to me and welcoming me. So, I easily just melded in,” she said. In addition to being president, she was on the board for curriculum for close to ten years.

Current President Arlin Larson had moved to Searsport to become the minister of the local Congregational Church. “I learned about the school and took some courses early on,” he said. He knew the college’s first president, John Cheston, a remarkable man who had worked with Sargent Shriver when Shriver began his campaign to end poverty. “We became good friends,” Dr. Larson said. “It was partly the reason I decided I could offer my teaching experience with a variety of religion-related courses and science. A couple of semesters back I taught world religions, and this past fall I taught Chinese and South Asian religions.” This spring Dr. Larson will teach a course on world scriptures.

Betty Theye has been involved with Belfast Senior College since its inception, and her husband Larry came on board after he retired from teaching at the University of Nebraska. Betty

observed that the mid-coast area is “very rich with senior retirees.”

At the onset of the college, she sent letters to about 160 of these retirees, and a good number of them replied with offers to teach and help in any way they could. As a result, a wide variety of courses were made available—one of the keys to the early success of the school.

The Theyes are especially glad for the use of the beautiful Hutchinson building. “One of the best things is that the building is very accessible for seniors to get around in,” Betty said. “And they were able to give us complete access one day a week—Thursdays—for holding classes. It’s been so successful ever since!”

Larry concurred. “In addition to the Hutchinson Center offering state-of-the-art technology, there’s an equally valuable social element as well,” he said, referring to the social coffee break in the middle of each session. “One of the things that drives this concept is the idea that after retirement you need to be mentally active,” he affirmed.

Ron and Shirley Jarvelle consider



Opposite: Students enjoy a lecture on Alexander Hamilton.

Above: The Hutchinson Center, home to Belfast Senior College. Contributed photo.

Left: Students at a watercolor class. Contributed photo.



Above: Taking a class on Mycology — the study of mushrooms.

Below: The Board of Trustees for Belfast Senior College: First row, left to right: Sandy Cirillo, Elisabeth Pollock, Karin Look, Barbara Klie. Second row left to right: John Economy, Dick Topping, Nancy Perkins, Sue Garrett, Arlin Larson, Elaine Potoker, Jim Taber, Lila Nation, Dave Boyer. Not pictured: Rebecca Jessup, Harry Kaiserian.

connecting with others one of the keys to the success of the college. “Not only is the coffee break time a real social benefit to those attending classes, but we are so lucky to have the Hutchinson Center,” said Ron. “Students meet at one place on the same day, so it really has that feeling of the college experience. There are also buses available, so those in assisted living or senior housing can enjoy this experience too. With the idea that no one should be left out, the college even has financial help for those who cannot afford classes.”

This passion for learning and connecting is what has made Belfast Senior College so successful over

the years. It is the second-largest senior college in Maine. (There are 17 senior colleges around the state). The membership has maintained a consistently high level of about 400, and they have a mailing list of over 700. President Larson was quick to point out that “Belfast is only a town of 7000, but the school has members from 40 different zip codes—half from Belfast and the other half from surrounding towns. Some travel more than an hour to attend class.”

In order to take a course at Belfast Senior College you need to be a member, except for the summer session. The variety is terrific: offerings this spring include classes on Virgil’s Aeneid, photography, conversational French, and the design of living landscapes in your own yard. There’s truly something for everyone.

The annual membership fee is \$25 dollars, and the membership year extends from September 1, 2019, through August 31, 2020. The fee for each six-week course is \$35, while four-week courses are \$30. There are also one- and two-day special classes for \$20.

According to Nancy Perkins, Trustee and Chair of the Publicity Committee, “Belfast Senior College is one of the largest nonprofits in Waldo County and offers learning opportunities to seniors for three terms a year. In addition, the college offers brown bag lunches with topical speakers, special events and trips to points of interest around the mid-coast area, and several one-day classes each year.” Perkins is also excited about an upcoming event in early May of 2020. “We are planning a gathering of representatives from all the senior colleges here in Maine,” she said. “It will be a great opportunity for everyone to network and exchange ideas about curriculum and classroom learning.”

Eleanor Roosevelt once famously said, “I could not, at any age, be content to take my place by the fireside and simply look on. Life was meant to be lived. Curiosity must be kept alive.” For sure, she would have relished being a student at this special place in Belfast, Maine!

Visit Belfast Senior College online at www.belfastseniorcollege.org, or give them a call for class information at 207-338-8033.