Older Students Learn for the Sake of Learning

Harriet Edleson

JOSH AND SUSAN FRIED attend classes three days a week but they never receive any grades or cram for midterms or finals. They are not trying to earn an additional degree or retrain for a new career.

Both are 68; they just want to learn with other like-minded adults.

Dr. Fried retired from his dental practice eight years ago and moved with his wife, Susan, a former English teacher, to Rockville, Md., from New York, to be closer to their son, daughter-in-law and grandchild (they now have two, ages 8 and 11). At the same time, they wanted to expand their life in retirement beyond family.

The Frieds are among the 150,000 men and women nationally who participate each year at more than 119 Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes. The institutes, affiliated mostly with colleges and universities, are among the best-known advanced adult educational programs in the country. Along with an array of other such
programs fitting under the “lifelong learning” umbrella, they tend to attract educated, passionate people who are seeking intellectual and social stimulation among peers who often become new friends.

Susan Fried, center, at a current events discussion at Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Johns Hopkins University in Rockville, Md. Chad Bartlett for The New York Times

They began their journey by going to a one-session class through the Smithsonian Associates Program in Washington, where another student told Mrs. Fried about Osher. “Now, we have something to do with our time,” Dr. Fried said.

Adult education programs have been a mainstay through local school districts, libraries, recreation departments and senior centers, but lifelong learning programs position themselves as communities where the participants not only take on challenging subjects but also seek to engage more deeply with their fellow students.

"The social component of this program is very important to the membership,” Mrs. Fried said.

Osher at Johns Hopkins has 1,200 members, and 500 on the waiting list. “They don’t want to be isolated,” said Mary Kay Shartle Galotto, the director of the local program. “If your mind’s active and you have opportunity for social networking, it gives you a life.”

Medical research has shown that as people age, intellectual stimulation and social interaction promote healthy minds. According to the Alzheimer’s Disease Education and Referral Center, “staying
cognitively active throughout life — via social engagement or intellectual stimulation — is associated with a lower risk of Alzheimer’s disease."

Another study, in 2012 by scientists at the Rush Alzheimer’s Disease Center and Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke’s Medical Center in Chicago, also found that frequent participation in “cognitively stimulating activities” — everything from reading to working on crossword puzzles and playing cards to going to museums and attending classes — is associated with a reduced risk of Alzheimer’s disease.

Osher at Johns Hopkins University has campuses in the Maryland cities of Rockville, Baltimore and Columbia, as well as two satellite locations and a third in the works. The satellite locations are at retirement communities in the area, and are open to the residents as well as others who live nearby.

The Bernard Osher Foundation, founded in 1977 to support higher education and the arts, has a grant program for Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes. “All locations are looking to expand services to keep up with the demand,” said David Blazevich, senior program director at the Bernard Osher Foundation in San Francisco.

For lifelong learners the focus is outward. At Osher, classes are not specifically skill-based, like learning a language or weaving. Instead, students generally delve into subjects they may have been interested in for years but simply didn’t have time to study.

Bill Lewis, 69, and Paula Ramsey Lewis, 67, both had intense careers. They were married in October 2014, and she has been attending classes for three years while he has belonged to Osher for four. Mr. Lewis was a senior executive in the federal government; she held numerous positions, among them director of development for the World Affairs Council of Northern California.

“I’m learning a lot of things I didn’t know,” Mr. Lewis said. Among their favorite classes are those taught by the journalist Eleanor Clift, including On the Road to the White House. “I think it’s very important that you plan what you are going to do before you retire,” Mr. Lewis said.

For some, lifelong learning programs fill a void left when they retire
or lose a spouse and friends move or die. Edith Litt, now 87, fits all three criteria. She had retired from her work as a city planner, her husband died in 1995 and many of her friends were moving to Florida.

More than a decade ago, Mrs. Litt, living in Tarrytown, N.Y., and on the Foundation Board of Westchester Community College, proposed the idea to the college. Initially, she said, there wasn’t enough classroom space.

She already had begun driving to New Haven to take architecture classes at Yale. Though she enjoyed the classes, she found the experience frustrating because she was the only nontraditional student. It fueled the idea for Collegium for Lifelong Learning, which got underway in 2003.

These days, the program has some 200 members and a waiting list.

At the Johns Hopkins program, full membership costs about $500 in annual dues. An associate membership, which limits which classes a member can take, is $125.

Membership at Collegium at Westchester Community College costs approximately $200 each for the Wednesday and Friday programs, or $400 for both days.

At the Westchester program, both learners and teachers — or leaders, as they are called at the Collegium — tend to be retired professional people. The focus is on the subject at hand.

“They’re not allowed to talk about grandchildren or doctor’s visits,” Mrs. Litt said.