

Hot Topics Course Hit of the Semester

Is a civil conversation about politics still possible in America? Yes, at least in an OLLI class. The fall OLLI course, *Hot Topics* presented a series of discussions of hot political issues. The class members were informed, edified, occasionally alarmed, and generally polite—in short, it was a very successful course. At 68 students, *Hot Topics* had the semester's second highest enrollment.

Hot Topics sessions lasted two hours. Will Singleton moderated, with occasional help from Ginny O'Leary (both OLLI board members). Most weeks saw two presenters with one on the pro side and one on the con of a particular issue. Sometimes the presenters were oppositional and sometimes they were complementary. Each class included 45 minutes of audience questions—often the liveliest portion of the meetings.

The first week's topic was affirmative action. Will Singleton presented the pro side. Ginny O'Leary took the con side (although she admitted at the outset that her heart wasn't really in it). The second week's presentation concerned sexual harassment: the presenters were highly informative, especially on issues related to harassment on campus, and a lively discussion followed. Week three's topic was corporate tax reform and the recent law passed by Congress. Lenny Tabs (OLLI Treasurer) expressed the view that while the law had some positive aspects, it had been excessively generous to the very wealthy.

The fourth topic was charter schools. Jason McCandless, Superintendent of Pittsfield Public Schools and Jay White, Executive Director, BART Charter School explained how public schools and charter

(continued on page 3)

Kate Sontag's Quest: What is a Poem?

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?

Such is the definition of poetry offered by Emily Dickinson. However, OLLI members can explore other ways of defining the elusive art, as we welcome Kate Sontag, a first time OLLI instructor. Sontag will teach **"What Makes a Poem?"** in the coming winter semester.

Sontag is an experienced poet and teacher. She received her MFA degree in poetry at the University of Iowa Writers Workshop. Her most recent teaching experience was at Ripon College, a small liberal arts school in Wisconsin, where she was a visiting professor from 2000 to 2015. Prior to that, she was an adjunct professor at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, from 1994 to 2000. Her courses included creative writing, composition, major authors, and story cycles.

Sontag's poetry has been widely published in journals and anthologies and she received the Ronald H. Bayes Poetry Prize from *Sandhills Review*, and the Severy Excellence in Teaching Award from Ripon College. Sontag is the co-editor of an essay anthology, *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography* and she's now editing an anthology of poems about hair...there are many more of those, both classic and modern, than most of us realize!



Kate Sontag

In soliciting poems for her new anthology, Sontag began to rethink what makes a good poem, and that question will inform her OLLI course. She will approach it more as a writer than an academic. In asking, "what makes a poem," Sontag looks at how different poets have tried to define poetry. During the course, by considering specific poems, class participants will discuss technical elements, personal taste, formal and free verse, style, content, and a poem's universal meaning.

Sontag's excitement about her new course is contagious, and even though she's had much teaching experience, she says she wanted to teach for OLLI to learn something new herself. By preparing for this course, she is "re-imagining—researching and rethinking—what makes a poem." She enjoys not only the challenge, but also engaging with students to get their contributions.

Sontag retired from college teaching two years ago, when she and her husband David Seligman, came to the Berkshires. They live in South Egremont. Originally from New York City, she wanted to re-settle in the East. She continues to write poetry and belongs to several workshop groups. Her other activities include swimming and going to concerts and poetry readings.

OLLI members who are well-versed (sorry) in poetry, and those who are less so can all look forward to a dynamic literature experience with Kate Sontag.

— Linda Halpern

OLLI Thrives as Membership Soars

President's Report

I am happy to report all of OLLI's major indicators are up. We had more class attendance in the fall semester than ever before, and our membership has briefly broken 1,200. The Special Events committee has been quite active this fall, taking trips to Mystic Seaport, Highlawn Farm, Storm King, and the Hudson River School of Art. The annual OLLI Theater Brunch was also a big success. The Membership Committee was busy running a very successful open house this fall. The board was delighted recently to learn that **Monica Sinclair** has agreed to co-chair the Membership Committee.



Barbara Lane has become our OLLI Vice-President. Lane has a wealth of experience and has already made solid contributions to the OLLI Board as Membership Chair and manager for the OLLI Shared Interest Groups. She lives in Stockbridge with her husband Ed. I am happy to have her as a close advisor on all matters OLLI.

As Barbara arrives, I extend my sincere thanks on the board's behalf to **Carl Shuster**, who is leaving the post of vice president after having served several terms. Over the last 18 months I have consulted Carl on many matters and have always appreciated his calm manner and wise advice. Among many notable accomplishments, Carl chaired OLLI's Strategic Planning initiative—twice— and helped organize our Shared Interest Group (SIG) program. Thanks, Carl for all your hard work on behalf of OLLI.

The Development Committee has been revitalized under the leadership of **Ben Liptzin**. (See the article on Liptzin on another page of this issue) You may already have received OLLI's annual appeal letter. I hope you will give serious consideration to making a donation to OLLI this year. With our expanding membership and increased course offerings, our fees and endowment

cannot by themselves generate all the revenue we need to maintain our high-quality level of service. That is why we rely on donations and fund raising to help fill the gap. If you're interested, Ben Liptzin or OLLI staff would be happy to speak with you about making a bequest to OLLI in your will.

OLLI and Berkshire Community College help each other in many ways. I had the pleasure of speaking to the honors students at BCC recently. The occasion was OLLI's recent donation of funds to buy more than 100 books for the college library.

The flyleaf of each book is inscribed with the name of a current BCC honor student. The students seemed quite pleased to have their names inscribed in these new library books.

OLLI has many opportunities for volunteer work. One continuing need is for an editor of our quarterly course catalog. Who is out there with editing skills? Surely, one or two of our members have experience in journalism or at least volunteered for their college yearbooks or newspapers? If you're interested, please let OLLI Executive Director **Megan Whilden** or me know of your interest.

— **Peter Bluhm, President**

OLLI's Winter 2019 Courses

This winter's semester begins January 15 and runs through March 1. Sign up now online at www.berkshireOLLI.org or call 413.236.2190 to register.

TUESDAYS in Great Barrington

Tuesdays at the Movies: Film Noir – Howard Arkans
Reading Short Stories Aloud: Encounters with Nature – Elizabeth Young
What Makes a Poem? – Kate Sontag

WEDNESDAYS in Pittsfield & Williamstown

Today's Headlines – David Orenstein, Pittsfield
Aging Through The Ages: The Past, Present, and Future of Human Longevity and Flourishing – Thomas Hodgson, Williamstown
Tolstoy's War and Peace – Julie Cassiday, Williamstown
Virgil's Aeneid in Latin – Jamie Keller, Pittsfield
Corrective History as a Path to the Future – Virginia O'Leary, Pittsfield

THURSDAYS in Pittsfield

God of the Philosophers: Pro and Con – William Cameron
Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World – Katherine Kidd

FRIDAYS in Pittsfield & Great Barrington

Science Conversations – Anthony Segal and Peter Bluhm, Pittsfield
Advances in Medicine – Drs. Stephen Will, Joseph Emrich, Margorie Safran & Mark Pettus, Pittsfield
Tchaikovsky: He Held the Key – Ken Stark, Pittsfield
W.E.B. Du Bois: Global Citizen Rooted in the Berkshires – curated by Gwendolyn Hampton Van Sant and Randy Weinstein, Great Barrington

If You Weren't There, Let Us Edify You

Editor's Note

If you believe, as comedian Robin Williams did, that those who remember the 1960's "weren't really there," you will find this edition of OLLI Update edifying. In her report on OLLI's University Day lectures, Feature Writer **Joanna Fribush** covers the panels and discussions that brought to life the ghosts from half a century ago who played a major part in changing the United States and the world. From Nelson Mandela to Che Guevara, to the Battle of Algiers, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, experts recounted events of that extraordinary year—1968—and discussed their lasting effects.

In this edition, we also look at OLLI's renewed effort at fundraising with the appointment of **Ben Liptzin** to head our revitalized development committee. In her report on Liptzin, Assistant Editor **Katherine Zdeb** looks at the objectives and challenges of ensuring that the growth of our revenue stream meets the growth of our organization.

Assistant Editor **Linda Halpern** interviews a new OLLI instructor and poet, **Kate Sontag** and helps us to begin to rethink the question, 'what makes a good poem.' In Sontag's upcoming course, OLLI members will explore other ways of defining the elusive art.

In his report, **Carl Shuster**, a long-time OLLI vice president, unveils OLLI's new strategic plan, including new initiatives that are to be launched in the months ahead. Among other things, the plan sets an ambitious goal of increasing OLLI membership to 1,400 over the next three years.

Is civil discourse about politics—or anything for that matter—still possible in America? The course *Hot Topics*, one of the best attended this past semester, found that it is. In this issue, Board of Directors member **Virginia O'Leary** and OLLI President **Peter Bluhm** give an overview of debates and discussions on various contentious topics such as affirmative action, harassment on campuses, corporate tax reform, charter schools and whether the media is fair.

And there is more. OLLI Executive Director **Megan Whilden** and Board of Directors member **Will Singleton** report on their trip to the national Osher Lifelong Learning Institute Conference to meet with OLLI counterparts from the other 120 chapters nationwide.

So, enjoy these articles and more in OLLI Update, and please let us hear from you.

— **Chris Guidette, Editor**



(Hot Topics continued from page 1)

schools in Massachusetts have now found ways to complement each other. Week five consisted of a series of talks on the future of jobs in America and the prospect of intelligent robots taking over more and more jobs. The discussion left class members in a thoughtful, yet somber mood.

The final topic was whether the media is fair. Christopher Guidette, retired journalist and public relations executive (also an OLLI Board of Directors member and editor of *OLLI Update*) and Shawn McIntosh, professor of journalism at MCLA, concluded fairness is entirely in the judgment of all those who have a stake—reader, listener, viewer, publisher, broadcaster, blogger, and of course, the subjects of the stories themselves. Since there is very little agreement on what constitutes fairness, most journalists' focus rests more on notions of balance—that is giving equal weight to opposing interests. But there's the rub. If you report on a leading astronomer's discovery of a billion-year-old occurrence in the universe, is a reporter obliged to give equal weight to an evangelical's belief that the world is really only 5,000 years old because it says so in Scripture?

OLLI's experiment in this debate-style course was definitely a success. Will Singleton showed exceptional skill in moderating and keeping audience comments under control. Evaluations have been positive, and both the presenters and the students enjoyed the experience. A sequel, *Hot Topics II*, will be offered next fall. — **Virginia O'Leary and Peter Bluhm**

SIGNificant News

The widespread appeal of **Shared Interest Groups** (SIGs) among members of OLLI at BCC has grown with the addition of two new SIGs.

"Happy Needlers and Hookers," co-facilitated by **Carolyn Vandervort** and **Carol Sabot**, welcomes needlework enthusiasts at any and all skill levels. SIG members have decided as a group to knit sweaters in a variety of sizes that can be donated to the Elizabeth Freeman Center.

Thad Kubis, a long-time OLLI photography instructor, has begun a SIG with the goal of introducing members to creating and executing photography with a new integrated vision of composition, technology and equipment.

To learn more about any existing SIG, or share your idea for a new one, contact **Barbara Lane** at barlane@earthlink.net. — **Barbara Lane, SIG Coordinator**

OLLI UPDATE

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Plotting Your OLLI'S Future

Strategic Plan

A newly completed strategic plan for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at Berkshire Community College (BCC) establishes new goals with a greater focus on meeting needs of the older adults, increasing revenue, adding more travel opportunities, longer semesters, and above all, increasing membership.

Strategic Plan Committee Chairman Carl Shuster unveiled the three-year plan at a Board of Directors meeting in October, acknowledging hard work by committee members and expert guidance by OLLI member and plan consultant Howard Shapiro. The plan is the result of ideas generated by those who served on the committee with input from focus groups comprised of members and non-members of the organization. The strategic planners also weighed the results of a recently completed membership survey that reflected a range of attitudes and wishes from the OLLI membership.

The new strategic plan proposes to:

- Expand the number of OLLI classes, lectures and other events during the summer months;
- Seek courses with outlooks and views that diverge from majority opinions in our region;
- Offer classes for older adults, such as wellness, financial management, lifestyle choices and legal needs;
- Provide programs aimed at reducing the isolation and loneliness of older adults in Berkshire County; and
- Expand travel offerings including foreign travel.

Other targets include:

- Simplifying access to classrooms and meeting locations—especially at Berkshire Community College;
- Offering instructions and assistance to increase OLLI members' technology competence, especially with computers and mobile devices;
- Seeking ways to make transportation to OLLI class and events available for those who cannot drive themselves;
- Launching an enhanced effort to increase OLLI's revenue stream through planned giving, business solicitation, fundraising for OLLI's scholarship fund, identification of profit centers within OLLI's existing capabilities, and soliciting funds from sources such as family foundations; and,
- Developing a cooperative arrangement with groups working to establish *Villages in the Berkshires*, a separate non-profit corporation that will provide information and assistance to older adults who wish to remain in their homes as they age.

Most important, the new strategic plan sets an ambitious goal of increasing OLLI membership over the next three years to 1,400 from our present historical high of 1,200 members. The new record high was recently achieved and announced in October.

The Strategic Planning Committee is chaired by Carl Shuster of OLLI's Board of Directors and Will Singleton, Robert Bogomolny, Sandi Rubin, Jill Sasso Curtis and Barbara Lane were members.

— Carl Shuster

Names in the (OLLI) News

With this issue of *OLLI Update*, we are introducing a new standing feature: "Awards and Citations," which takes note of OLLI members who have been recognized for achievement by OLLI or the larger Berkshire community. If you or someone you know has earned an award or received an encomium please let us know. In this edition we cite:

Our Executive Director, **Megan Whilden** who recently was named to the prestigious annual "Berkshire 25" list of influential community leaders of 2018 by *Berkshire Magazine*. She was called among the "most dedicated, most creative, and most influential people for 2018." The magazine said "she has been a creative force since her arrival in the Berkshires decades ago." It cited her service as Pittsfield's first director of cultural development and her work as executive director of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at BCC. ...**Virginia O'Leary**, an OLLI Board of Directors member, and **Kirk Swiss**, an OLLI member and *OLLI Update* photographer each received the Jean Ryan Award for their volunteer services to the Barrington Stage Company. ... And in the news, OLLI members **Barbara Lane** and **Nancy Vale** were quoted in an article on the CNBC website about lifelong learning across the country entitled "More Retirees are Going Back to School. Here's How You Can, Too." Great to see our OLLI here in the Berkshires featured nationally!



WINTER WEATHER CLOSINGS

OLLI follows the lead of Berkshire Community College when cancelling classes and events due to severe weather. We inform our students by email as soon as we learn of a weather-related cancellation. You can also check the BCC website for the latest information, which will be posted prominently on their front page: www.berkshirecc.edu. Decisions are usually made and posted by 6am.

Ghosts from a Half Century Ago Awaken Audiences

University Day

The ghosts of Nelson Mandela, Che Guevara, Steven Biko, Alexander Dubcek, Ho Chi Minh, Enoch Powell, Charles De Gaulle, the Battle of Algiers, French students at the barricades and the Tet Offensive came to life on the 50th anniversary of that extraordinary year—1968—at OLLI's November "University Day," a day-long program of panel discussions, lectures and films presented at Bard College at Simon's Rock.

The program, presented on Nov. 7, centered on international events that rocked—and some think—changed the world fifty years ago. An earlier "Fifty Years Later" University Day in August covered 1968 events within the United States, including the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the urban race riots, the murder of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, the election of Richard Nixon, his infamous "Southern Strategy," and more.

Both sessions were led by University Day Chair Katherine Kidd and organized by her committee of Brian Harrison, Ellen Croibier, Will Singleton and Kit Dobbelle.

The November session opened with "Global Voices of '68," a panel of diverse speakers reading recollections of events in Poland, France, South Africa, Pakistan and other countries. The theme was protest and violence. Whether against apartheid, war, racism or anti-Semitism, people from many countries rose to action, questioning why the ideals of democracy and universal human rights were not realized in their countries.

Other panelists throughout the day presented recollections and information on disasters and riots throughout the world in 1968. Witnesses to history in Panama, France and Czechoslovakia shared their

personal stories of life in those countries; conflicts between communism and democracy were common sources of protests and riots.

Luncheon speaker Martin Weinstein spoke about brutality, revolutions and protests in Latin America and the U.S. role in overthrowing the government of Chilean President Salvador Allende.

Bernadette Brusco, who was living in Biafra during 1968, told of the horrors of its civil war. Film clips were shown to illustrate the relationship between film and politics and student reactions.

University Day involved members of Bard College's faculty and students and OLLI members. Several professors were featured speakers and panelists; students created a timeline for world events, which was displayed.

The August session featured changes within the U.S.—assassinations, riots, anti-war protests and cultural changes.

In August, the opening speaker was David Margolick, author of *The Promises and the Dream: The Untold Story of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy*. Separate sessions in the day-long pro-

gram related to cultural changes in music, feminism, civil rights, the Vietnam War, sports, black power, and personal memories.

A timeline, with written statements of attendees' 1968 memories and photos from the Berkshire Eagle, was displayed and an oral history of selected OLLI members was recorded. The oral history will be archived at the University of Massachusetts Library Special Collections and available on OLLI's website.

Berkshire area cultural changes included introducing popular music to Tanglewood and plans to triple the size of The Clark Institute. Planning also got underway to create a new Berkshire Community College campus on West Street and to build a monument to W.E.B. Du Bois in Great Barrington.

And 1968, a year of such portent of progressive change, ended with the election of that most conservative president, Richard Nixon.

The University Day series on 1968 was extremely well attended and received, and Kidd, its planner, was widely praised.

— Joanna Fribush



August University Day "Voices of '68" participants (left to right): OLLI members Nancy Bott, Karel Fisher, Nancy Vale, Jesse Waldinger, Barbara Waldinger, who directed the readings, Karen McNulty, Will Singleton, Amelia Berg, Edith Pye, and Molly Pomerance.

PHOTO BY BARBARA WALDINGER

National OLLI Conference Inspires, Energizes our Representatives

OLLI Board of Directors member Will Singleton and OLLI Executive Director Megan Whilden said they were inspired and energized by two days of lectures and meetings with fellow OLLI staffers and members from around the country at the National Osher Institute Conference in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Held every 18 months, the October OLLI conference is a chance for each OLLI chapter to send two people, optimally a staff member and volunteer leader, to network with their fellow OLLI participants and discover new and better ways to serve their members. The Osher Foundation covers all costs except transportation.

Bernard Osher, the founder of the Osher Foundation and the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute network, attended the October gathering in time to celebrate his 90th birthday, telling attendees he recently took up piano and went surfing: a true lifelong learner!

The event was packed with plenary speakers, breakout workshops and

opportunities to network with other OLLI staff and volunteers from Hawaii to Maine. Singleton and Whilden took advantage of opportunities to meet other attendees, including a group of New England OLLI staff and volunteers, to share ideas, challenges and opportunities to collaborate.

Fundraising, diversity and talks on inherent bias, were on the agenda as well as breakthrough research on relieving stress and living longer. Other topics, including marketing, volunteers, encouraging civil conversations in classrooms and managing staff-volunteer leadership relationships were also on the agenda.

More than 120 OLLIs operate in all fifty states and share a common goal of providing stimulating educational oppor-

tunities designed by and for people fifty years old and older.

Whilden said she and Singleton were inspired and energized by the conference and left with great ideas from other OLLIs. "We're looking forward to the next national OLLI conference" she said.

— Will Singleton and Megan Whilden



PHOTO BY MEGAN WHILDEN

Will Singleton with Bernard Osher, founder of the Osher Foundation and the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute network

Celebration Honoring Arline Beskin

Arline Breskin is one of OLLI's hidden treasures. As Chair of the Special Events Committee, she has been responsible for countless exciting trips throughout Massachusetts, New York, Connecticut, Florida and Cuba. She was feted at a Cranwell Resort luncheon attended by 135 friends, family and OLLI members. The event raised more than \$7,000 to support OLLI's educational programs.

— Sandi Rubin

Top: Arline and her family

Bottom: Steve Tobin and Carol Sabot, event co-chairs with Claudia Shuster, OLLI member and artist, presenting her painting, a gift to Arline



PHOTOS BY SEAN KARDON

Thank You OLLI Angels

As a non-profit community organization, OLLI at BCC relies on the generosity of members like you to ensure OLLI can continue to offer vibrant educational programming, scholarships to all who need them, mentoring opportunities to BCC students, and much more.

The list below acknowledges OLLI donors who gave between July 1, 2017 – June 30, 2018. Thank you each and every one for your generous support of lifelong learning in the Berkshires.

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Fundraising Comes Naturally to OLLI's Ben Liptzin

New Development Chair

Ben Liptzin has some explaining to do. He's more than up to the task.

Chief among his challenges as new chair of OLLI's Development Committee is making plain to members the need for more philanthropy. Why, they might ask, is OLLI extending a hand when it's sitting on a \$2 million endowment? What of the annual appeal's contribution? When is enough enough?

The answer is when growth of the organization meets growth of the revenue stream. Currently it's a bit of a mismatch.

The first thing to understand is this: OLLI draws little more than interest from the Osher millions. This year that fund will provide almost 40 percent of the operating budget. Dues and class fees will contribute a bit more than 50 percent. Fundraising activities and donations will help round out the \$288,000 budget. Donations? They are expected to contribute a small but very important eight percent.

With this in mind, and knowing that leaving the Osher capital largely untouched ensures long-term stability, fiscal eyes turned toward development. OLLI President Peter Bluhm went looking for assistance.

Bluhm had noticed Liptzin's active participation in his "Science Conversations" class. The behavior came naturally. Liptzin and his wife Sharon moved permanently to their second home in Stockbridge three years ago on his retirement as chair of psychiatry at Baystate Medical Center in Springfield, Mass.

Thanks to an invitation for coffee with Bluhm, Liptzin volunteered to chair the development group.

The challenge as Liptzin sees it, is that a cultural change must happen to explain why charitable contributions are crucial. For example, OLLI wants to improve accessibility to its programs; raising dues and class fees would only dampen that effort, while scholarships would assist it. There are also capital needs, such as audio-visual equipment. Staff consume two-thirds of the budget, yet they're stretched thin with increased members, classes and activities. Could philanthropy fund an additional position?

The other members of the development committee are: Bob Bogomolny, Shel Goldberg, Sandi Rubin, Carl Shuster, Ellen Croibier, and Steve Tobin. New members are welcome.



— Katherine Zdeb