



SENIOR LIFE: MAY IS OLDER AMERICANS' MONTH!

TODAY'S SENIORS: LEARNING WITH GUSTO AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HARTFORD'S PRESIDENT'S COLLEGE

By Meg Aldrich

Same old, same old? Not so much, it turns out. While the golden years have often conjured up less-than-golden images of aging, research tells a different story, showing a wide diversity of aging experiences. We're seeing a large percentage of seniors remaining active, seeking value and purpose - trying new careers, volunteering, taking up new sports, and engaging in politics.

Bloomfield resident Amy Lynn Silverman is among these active seniors. Her career had included teaching English and Latin before a second career as a development professional. When she retired, she wanted the next phase of her life to have the variety and intellectual stimulation of her work life. "The world is exciting and full of change. I want to stay engaged with it," she said.

Enter the Presidents' College, the University of Hartford's lifelong learning program. The program offers lectures and short, two or three session courses in the arts, history, current events, literature, science, and engineering. It also ventures outside the classroom, offering lectures connected with performances at the Hartford Stage, Playhouse on Park, and the Hartford Symphony Orchestra. "Courses on the Supreme Court and politics keep me growing and changing. But sometimes I just love to settle into something different in art or music or literature. There's always something to intrigue me," Silverman continued.

May is Older Americans Month, so designated by President John F. Kennedy in 1963 as a way to honor individuals age 65+ for their contributions to their community and country. Yet today's 65-year-olds are vastly different from those in Kennedy's day. They're living longer, thanks to better health care and education about the importance of fitness and diet. Longer lifespans mean that their retirement is more nuanced, unfurling in multiple stages. Retirees can look forward to many active years traveling, watching grandchildren grow, volunteering, and staying physically active.

Today's seniors also have the benefit of more research on healthy aging. Especially post-pandemic, they're aware of the importance of staying engaged and connected with friends,



neighbors, family, and community. The 2023 Surgeon General's Advisory noted the negative effects of isolation, paving the way for states and towns to amp up their efforts to build community. Connecticut Senator Chris Murphy, for instance, has introduced legislation for a grant program to keep seniors connected socially.

Lifelong learning programs like the Presidents' College - with its slogan "Learning Connects the Curious" - have long understood the benefits of coming together through learning. "My friend, Ellen, and I love taking courses together. We are both inspired by the instructors, as well as by our fellow students. There are some very knowledgeable participants who make class discussions thought-provoking," said Diana Hughes of Bloomfield. "Our conversations often spill

over after class. I've reconnected with past friends and have made some wonderful new friendships. I feel so fortunate that this gem is available to me right in my own backyard," she continued.

The Presidents' College was founded in 1990 by then University of Hartford President, Humphrey Tonkin. Ahead of his time, Tonkin saw the benefits of engaging people from the surrounding communities in the intellectual life of the campus. That core mission has stayed the same, but Presidents' College has changed to keep pace with a changing senior population. The program intentionally offers mini-courses rather than courses that run the full semester to accommodate schedules that include travel, volunteer work, and caring for grandchildren. While program favorites include classes on art or Shakespeare,

courses on artificial intelligence, advances in space travel, and the changing political landscape are growing increasingly popular. Post-pandemic, classes are back to being held in-person, the overwhelming preference of the student body.

In her Presidents' College lectures, Chemistry professor Laura Pence showcases her expertise in topics like water rights and forest fires. "This audience is one of my favorites to teach because they have personal context for events. When I ask about what significant forest fire event in 1988 changed how people looked at fires, someone always comes up with the big Yellowstone fires. My current students weren't even alive for September 11, 2001, so 1988 was ancient history for them."

Increasingly, the Presidents' College is actually beginning to bring generations together. Its target demographic was traditionally people 55+. However, since the pandemic, the faces of people in their 20s, 30s, and 40s have begun popping up in class. With more individuals working remotely and schedules more flexible, people are able to fit a short jazz or literature course into their schedules. Plus, the program's affiliation with the University of Hartford makes it possible to bring undergradu-

ates together with older learners - a fruitful chance for dialogue across the generations.

The Presidents' College was the first in the Greater Hartford area to introduce a Silent Book Club. Attendees bring their own book to the venue and mingle for the first half hour. Then everyone reads their own book silently, enjoying the camaraderie of other book lovers. The last half hour is for socializing and exchanging book recommendations. These Silent Book Clubs have attracted people from 20 to 80. Both the New York Times and the Washington Post recently did articles on these "silent reading parties," noting that younger generations are hungry for connection now that the Covid-19 pandemic has abated.

There are roughly 10,000 Baby Boomers turning 65 every day across the U.S. according to the Transamerica Center for Retirement Research. Just as they've had a huge impact on other life stages, they're reshaping retirement and what it means to grow older. Maybe it's time we replaced some of the antiquated thinking about aging to embrace a wider range of possibilities. After all, nobody has found a way to avoid aging - not yet anyway - but we can embrace the change with more gusto than ever before.

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