

Acadia Senior College builds on mature students' depth of experience



Farnham Butler (above) of Mount Desert Island is taking Introduction to Islam at Acadia Senior college in Northeast Harbor. Instructor Moorhead Kennedy (below) on Thursday gives one of four lectures in the class, which is offered simply for the pleasure of learning. (NEWS Photos by Miller Pearsall)

THE FREEDOM TO LEARN

By Misty Edgecomb
Of the NEWS Staff

Maine is growing up. The state's low crime rates and natural resources have proved irresistible as the first wave of baby boomer retirees looks for places to spend the "third age." Recent census figures show 76 million boomers seeking places like Belfast and Bar Harbor for their leisure years.

But the state's increasingly top-heavy population pyramid isn't satisfied to doze away those precious retirement years.

"I call it the bonus that we got from the medical profession," said Bar Harbor resident Jim Clunan. "In the generations before mine, you worked hard, retired at 65, and didn't last much longer. I want to see myself, and people

like me, using their brains," he said.

So Clunan founded a college.

Actually, he is among a group of about 20 retired professionals on Mount Desert Island who have spent the past year creating Acadia Senior College, a combination classroom and country club in Northeast Harbor that offers area retirees intellectual and social stimulation.

"You've got a lot of people who have been scientists or professors, and with retirement, the mind hasn't slowed. They just have more time to spend," said Moorhead "Mike" Kennedy of Somesville, an Acadia Senior College instructor and a former Iran hostage.

"This is a natural opportunity to come in, get to know people, expand your horizons," he said.

At a recent meeting of Kennedy's "Introduction to Islam" course at the Neighborhood House in Northeast

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Harbor, men and women ages 50 to 90 packed the small room. They listened politely, scribbling notes and flipping through texts, while Kennedy delivered his lecture on the role of women in Islamic marriage.

But when Kennedy finished his presentation, the students took over, using their personal histories — a psychotherapist, a biologist, a native of the Middle East — to supplement the lecture with a lively discussion that continued for nearly 45 minutes.

"It's a free exchange of ideas," said college member Jim Applewhite of Bar Harbor.

"There's the benefit of experience of age," said Carol Woolman, a Bar Harbor woman who teaches a writing course. "A lot of people have traveled widely and come from a depth of experience that you might not expect."

And the self-consciousness that makes discussion so painful for many traditional-age college students is refreshingly absent from this congress of equals, according to Rick Wright, a seasoned college professor who teaches a course in oceanography.

"The atmosphere in senior college classes is much different. There's no nonsense about having to give grades," he said. "You can be friendly with the students."

By design, Acadia Senior College eschews grades, examina-



Gail Reiber (from left), Barbara Danielson and Frank Barnes listen as Moorhead Kennedy lectures on Islamic traditions, at the Acadia Senior College on Thursday at the Neighborhood House in Northeast Harbor. (NEWS Photo by Miller Pearsall)

tions, tests and credits. There is no right and no wrong. It is simply seniors sharing knowledge with seniors. The strategy frees both instructor and student from having to conform to a standard, and leaves them free to learn, Clunan said.

"You are free to soak up the information," said Woolman. "There's an openness to the inquiry when you don't have to pass a test. You are free to go wherever your mind takes you."

Although its membership represents several generations, Acadia Senior College has students who can share a wealth of common experiences, from the quirky to the profound.

They were born before the advent of television; they have completed their child-rearing and career years; they are facing the possibility of long-term illness; they have better handwriting than today's computer users, Clunan said.

"There's a common thread, so we can feel more free to express

our opinions," said Bar Harbor resident Jim Geary.

This vision for Acadia Senior College developed in 1999, when Clunan lived for a time in the Portland area and signed up for a current events discussion course at the University of Southern Maine Senior College.

The first in Maine, USM's Senior College was founded in 1997 by Rabbi Harry Sky. It since has grown to more than 600 students, offering exploratory classes across the academic spectrum.

Clunan knew that the approach would appeal to the swelling population of educated retirees on Mount Desert Island.

"I had a hunch that we'd have a ready-made constituency," he said.

Clunan returned home with a mission.

He recruited Bonnie Sparks, director of the Ellsworth Center, a University of Maine Continuing Education site, Ed Kaelber of College of the Atlantic, and well-

connected locals such as Kennedy and Bob Pyle to help drum up support for the college.

"Each of us had our lines out into the community," Clunan said.

When the first organizational meetings were held a year ago, more than 120 people showed up. Members of the fledgling college donated more than \$3,000 and earned a \$45,000 grant from Maine Community Foundation to cover startup costs.

"They pulled it all together in a grass-roots effort," Sparks said. "As a group, they have a vision of themselves."

The senior college concept began 20 years ago when Elderhostel began encouraging educational programs designed specifically for people over 50, linking groups worldwide with its Elderhostel Institute Network.

The programs took different forms and names — "institutes for learning and retirement" in the United States, and "universi-

ties of the third age" overseas.

"There's just an explosion of learning in the years after 50. We are learning creatures," said Annette Norisman, director of the National Retired Teachers Association.

Acadia Senior College designed a streamlined operations system that allows the group to be financially independent.

"We're not trying to make a profit with this operation," Clunan said.

As at USM, members pay \$25 yearly dues, \$50 for the first class and \$25 for any additional classes. All books and materials are covered by the tuition cost and are ordered by Port in a Storm bookstore in Somesville.

For half of the yearly dues and a 20 percent share of tuition revenue, the Ellsworth Center offered Acadia Senior College immediate tax-exempt status and expert financial management.

"They provided the common-

sense judgment about starting an educational institution," Clunan said.

Other partner institutions such as Neighborhood House in Northeast Harbor, the Maine Sea Coast Mission Society in Bar Harbor, College of the Atlantic, Harbor House in Southwest Harbor and several public libraries offered meeting space at no cost.

Instructors are senior college members who volunteer their time and expertise. "The instructors are learning all the time too," he said.

Ninety people signed up for the premiere semester, turning out for courses in art, religion, politics, biology and finance with a senior slant.

In its second semester, with a membership nearing 100 people, Acadia Senior College is running well in the black and looking to start an endowment to assure its stability, Clunan said.