

# ACADIA SENIOR COLLEGE

## A Brief History

By Bill Dohmen

The Acadia Senior College (ASC) has grown from a seed planted in Jim Clunan's imagination in 1999 when he attended courses at the fledgling senior college which Rabbi Harry Sky had organized in Portland at the University of Southern Maine. Mentored by the Rabbi and challenged by his wife Dorothy to found a similar organization on MDI, Jim eagerly took up the gauntlet. Both Jim and Dorothy were recently retired from careers in the foreign service (American and British, respectively), and had been seeking an exciting new assignment. Jim placed notices in the Bar Harbor Times that meetings would be held on two evenings in February 2000 at the Somesville Fire Station; over 100 residents braved the wintry cold to attend, propose classes, and volunteer to organize the new college. The following month Acadia Senior College was named and officially founded.

The seed of ASC then sprouted rapidly: an 18-member steering committee was established, agreements to hold classes in local non-profit sites were negotiated, donations were raised, and a mission statement was approved: to "provide intellectual stimulation, practical knowledge, social interaction, and fun, primarily for adults over 55 [since revised to age 50]." The committee agreed that ASC would not offer credits, not assign grades, not require exams, would operate from a "dispersed campus" of multiple donated sites around the island, and would rely on volunteer teachers and committees. The University College at Ellsworth, led by Bonnie Sparks, provided administrative support (registrar, financial and accounting services, office space, fund-raising ability through UCE's tax-exempt status) for a percentage of ASC revenues. By the fall of 2000, ASC offered its first class term, attracting 110 students to 9 courses, sponsored 6 lectures, and had 124 members. Two timely grants of \$5,000 each were provided by the Maine Community Foundation and the State Senior College System. Major gifts were designated by the Board as a "Founders' Fund," intended as a long-term reserve, not to be used for ordinary operating expenses. The Bangor Daily News in February 2001 ran a feature article on ASC that generated welcome publicity and additional members.

ASC flourished on MDI in soil rich with retired academics, scientists, government officials and other professionals. Courses were presented in three terms each year, typically 10 to 20 subjects per term, taught in 2-hour weekly sessions over 4 to 8 weeks. By the end of 2004, ASC had offered more than 140 courses to over 1,500 students, and was mature enough to leave its nest at UC-Ellsworth. The Downeast Senior College had already split away, taking most members in the Blue hill/Ellsworth/Schoodic area, leaving ASC to focus its resources on MDI.

With some trepidation moderated by optimism, the Board declared independence in November. By spring 2005, a lease was negotiated with the College of the Atlantic for a small office in the Gates Center, an advertisement for an office administrator had been published, leading to the hiring of Phyllis Young, ASC was issued its EIN and opened bank accounts, and in February the IRS approved ASC's application as a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation. Liability and Board E&O insurance policies were obtained, and the State of Maine awarded ASC a license to raise funds as a Charitable Organization. Attorney Bill Ferm assisted in drafting By-Laws, agreed to serve as registered agent and to file an annual report with the State, as he still does.

During the subsequent 15 years, ASC has thrived as its membership grew and has finally plateaued in a 350 – 400 range. Thanks to a dedicated and diligent cadre of member volunteers, much of the college's activity is directed by standing committees, now including Curriculum, Advancement, Membership & Volunteers, Events, Finance, Nominating, and Technology. Boyd Palmer served as volunteer bookkeeper in the early years, establishing an accounting system using QuickBooks; upon his retirement, ASC contracted with a part-time professional bookkeeper. Financial statements are compiled annually by a CPA firm, which also files the college's Form 990 with the IRS, required of non-profits in lieu of tax forms. Course textbooks have been supplied through partnerships, first with Port in a Storm Bookstore, and later with Sherman's in Bar Harbor. Available sites for classes expanded to more than 15 locations, spread over the entire island. Remaining true to the initial lean-operation philosophy of minimizing expenses, ASC does not pay its teachers or its site hosts, though the college does express its gratitude with modest annual donations to these organizations. In 2006 the college's first website was launched, which was significantly upgraded in 2017.

Over the years ASC has greatly added to its range of programs and activities, sponsoring noontime talks and lunches at Birch Bay in the "Food for Thought" program, adding morning "Coffee Clash" discussions at Sips Restaurant, and collaborating for four summers with COA to present week-long series of prominent speakers. Many other noted national figures have delivered lectures for ASC members and the public: Zbigniew Brzezinski, Matthew Simmons and Frederick Hitz spoke in 2004 alone. Other lecturers appearing for ASC have included Philip Geyelin, George Mitchell, Dr. Edward Benz, Jr., Theda Skocpol, David Hackett Fischer, Rick Woychik, Robert Kates, Carl Little and Boyden Gray. Numerous bus excursions to Maine museums, gardens, concerts and other events proved popular, as were plays, filmed opera and movie showings, often preceded by informative talks. Annual art shows have highlighted our members' creativity. Courses in sports and exercise programs have added to the more traditional academic and arts offerings. Board retreats in 2003, 2006 and 2009 developed 3-year strategic plans that helped to guide the college's growth through its first decade. After leading ASC through its first eight years, Jim Clunan stepped down from the presidency, but he and Dorothy will always be, in Jim's phrase, "its instigators."

In 2008 an opportunity arose for ASC to achieve greater financial security, assuring the continuing capacity to pay office rent, salary for an office administrator, purchase classroom equipment, and other expenses attendant upon its new independent status: the Maine

Community Foundation announced that in conjunction with its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, it was launching a 25/25 Nonprofit Endowment Challenge. Organizations which qualified in a state-wide competition would have a year to raise \$25,000 in new contributions, which would then be matched by a \$25,000 grant from the Foundation to seed an endowment. The Foundation would additionally provide training and fund-raising guidance. That June, ASC was named among those chosen for the match opportunity, and by June 2009 had easily surpassed the \$25,000 goal and was awarded the matching grant by MCF. When the college's original Founders' Fund was then rolled into the new endowment, held and invested by the Foundation, ASC had successfully ensured its future financial security.

Phyllis Young resigned in 2007 for a job closer to her home in Ellsworth, to be replaced by Jude Lamb, who ran the ASC office with great skill and grace for over a decade, retiring in 2018. Meanwhile, COA found it needed the Gates Hall office for its own uses, so in 2012 ASC relocated to a second-floor office at the Maine Seacoast Mission, which ASC leased until the Mission sold the building in 2018. At that time ASC contracted with AvantLogic Corporation (Janice Kenyon) to perform administrative duties from her home office (thus ending rent costs for office space).

As our college now celebrates its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, ASC has become a major force in the intellectual, cultural and social life of MDI, helping to attract new residents and even inspiring the occasional marriage among members. By maintaining a relatively modest annual operating budget of around \$75,000 (revenues deriving in roughly equal thirds from course tuitions, membership fees, and donations), ASC has more than justified its decision to become independent. Over these two decades, ASC has offered more than 720 courses to more than 8,300 students. As the sixth president of ASC, Linda Dunn is ably leading a thriving organization into its third decade of providing intellectual stimulation, practical knowledge, social interaction and fun.