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NEIGHBORHOOD NEWS

Fox Chapel Area Adult Education Celebrates 50-Year Anniversary

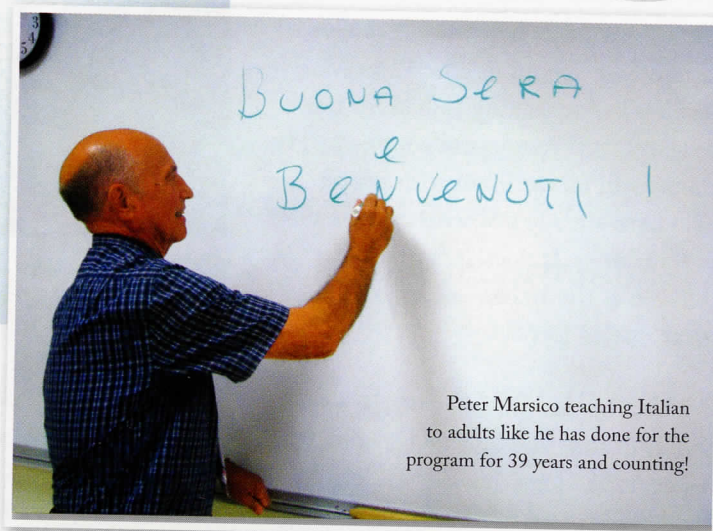
Fifty years ago, some persuasive local residents went before the Fox Chapel Area School District Board of Education with a proposal. The school district, the result of a recent merger of Aspinwall, Blawnox, Fox Chapel, and Sharpsburg Boroughs and Indiana and O'Hara Townships, had finally built a high school. Was it possible to also use the facilities to educate adults?

The board and school administration gave their support, and the program now known as Fox Chapel Area Adult Education (FCAAE) was born.

In the fifty years since that start, FCAAE's original mission remains the same: To provide enrichment classes to community adults at a reasonable cost. Then, as now, the program relies on local residents who share their knowledge and expertise.

Currently, 1,400–1,800 students enroll annually in the 80–90 classes offered over two semesters. The beginning slate of courses was much smaller. Printed with an initial loan of \$100 from the O'Hara Women's Club, the Fall 1962 brochure listed eight classes. Indicative of the Cold War fears at the time, one of the offerings was a Civil Defense course.

From this small start, the program grew and classes were certainly representative of both the interests and the technological



Peter Marsico teaching Italian to adults like he has done for the program for 39 years and counting!

advances of each decade. FCAAE board member and retired Fox Chapel Area High School business education teacher Nancy Rofey remarks, "I think the *Shorthand* and *Transcription Dictation* course listings in the 1970s are an example of how far we've come in technology. I myself can remember when the most current course offering was *Word Processing for Beginners*, and all of a sudden, *Introduction to Windows* appeared. It was only a few years until *Design Your Own FrontPage Website* was on our course list."

Fitness classes have always been a key part of the programming. Swimming, basketball, and yoga have been program constants for five decades. Physical activity options have expanded to include a variety of water classes, aerobics of all sorts, Pilates, and dance classes. Currently the top demand for exercise is *Zumba*, a dance/exercise program done to an energetic Latin beat.

Cooking and language classes have always been popular, and they continue to be hallmarks of the program. "Our cooking classes sell out quickly," comments Director and Fox Chapel resident Susan Goodwin, "and I've tried to make sure we've had two classes per semester to meet student demand." She is particularly proud that FCAAE offers a variety of language classes at such a reasonable price. "One of my board members was

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so proud to overhear a local restaurant worker say to a customer, 'I can't believe I'm able to afford a course to learn Chinese.' That's the kind of thing that tells me we're fulfilling our educational mission to the community."

Along that line, Goodwin notes that retired high school teacher Peter Marsico has been teaching Italian for the program for 39 years and counting. "His classes still fill up, often with people who have already taken his courses three or four times. It doesn't matter what the title of the Italian course is they come. He's a gift."

FCAAE has always relied on the generosity of time and knowledge of local residents like Mr. Marsico. The late Art Grindle, a retired Fox Chapel Area High school principal, and his wife Ginny, the high school swim team founders, were also FCAAE program pioneers, offering the *Swimming Instructions for Beginners and Recreational Swim* courses in the very first year. Mrs. Rofey was the backbone, not only teaching various adult evening business courses, but also finding talented instructors to fill gaps in programming. LaDonna Bates, a former board member, has for years always donated her time in teaching such courses as *Right-Brain People in a Left-Brain World* and *Clutter and Time Management*. Local residents Carol Papas, Sally Foster, and Linda Kramer have taught and shared their garden bounty many times. High school teacher Ron Frank's jewelry classes always sell out within days. "I could go on and on," says Mrs. Goodwin. "We are so fortunate in that our community has so many talented people willing to give back."

The course offerings have also benefited the future of FCAAE. Mrs. Goodwin explains that, "Our Website designer/administrator and current board member,



Long-time board members and former Presidents of FCAAE Bernadine Bonessa (on left) and Celeste Janosko (on right) looking at the trademark red and white semester brochure.

Amy Bilkey, knew nothing about Websites until she took our course *Design Your Own FrontPage Website*. Our current treasurer, Gail Harger, was such a wonderful teacher for our adults that we just had to ask her to serve on our board. Kathleen Wendell, teacher of *A History of Pittsburgh Women and Their Fashion* for the upcoming semester, kindly researched FCAAE's history this past summer and has contributed so much that she too has been asked to join our ranks."

The program's intrinsic relationship with the school district has been key to the longevity of the program. Officially registered as a private non-profit with Pennsylvania in 1979, the name of the program, "Fox Chapel Area School District Adult Education Committee," as filed by the school district's solicitor, is a good explanation of the very cooperative relationship between the district and the FCAAE. With very few exceptions, classes are held in district buildings, allowing the FCAAE to keep prices low enough for the entire community. Since its inception, the organization has donated more than \$30,000 to the district for computer equipment, art supplies, and home economics and fitness equipment.

Aware that its programming should dovetail with the mission of the district, the FCAAE has also helped adults to achieve their high school diplomas.

"We also make sure our taxpayers get the most value from the program," comments Mrs. Goodwin. "Business owners, district employees, and residents receive a discount on their courses while outside district adult students pay just \$5 more per course, which is still well below market price. It's a win-win. We can offer more courses to attract outside district enrollments; the extra tuition from those outside enrollments helps us keep lower prices overall, especially for the Fox Chapel Area School District community."

FCAAE's Board of Directors, required by bylaws to live within the district, has continued the early tradition of keeping overhead costs to a minimum, and each year, it makes sure that the program's non-profit status is indeed "non-profit." FCAAE Treasurer Mrs. Harger states, "Keeping our course prices low is a priority because we know that each dollar added to class costs can make a difference in offering opportunities to all community adults, not to just a privileged few."

One of the ways costs have always been kept low is in the number of employees. In the earliest years, there were no administrative employees. The volunteer directors did everything, including coming up with class ideas, finding teachers, writing up the brochure, packaging the brochure mailing, and staffing registration.

Most of the burden of the program fell on whoever was president. Ruth Jones served as the first president and held that office for 25 years. "We owe her so much," remarks another former FCAAE president, Bernadine Bonessa. "She was the absolute guiding light of this program, and to the Fox Chapel Area community at large." Mrs. Bonessa herself devoted eight years as president, scheduling even her family life around the publication of semester brochures and registrations. She remembers sitting on the family room floor with her elementary-age boys, counting out thousands of brochures for distribution to every post office, placing hundreds of labels by hand on the brochures mailed to adult students who lived out of the district. Mrs. Bonessa laughs, "The crazy thing is that my boys thought this work was fun."

By the third decade of operation, the board knew it needed more constant help and hired a former Fox Chapel Area School District secretary, Betty Lou O'Malley to assist with registrations.

The method of registration probably has been the most dramatic change. Celeste Janosko, also a former FCAAE president and current board member, remembers when prospective students had only one evening to sign up at different tables for each class: "Yes, the feeling in the hallways was friendly, and people would discuss what classes they hoped to take. But then the gym doors would open, and people would flood the gym and almost race from table to table."

Fortunately, registration has evolved from using pencils and carbon paper to mailed-in forms. "It was a helpful transition," remarks Mrs. Janosko. "We tested having a mail-in and then one night of in-person registration for any classes that were still open. We eventually stopped the one-night registration and have changed completely to mail-in registration."

When registration transitioned to a mainly mail-in procedure, enrollment jumped. Eventually, in 2003, the board knew that it was time to have someone officially shoulder most of the responsibilities for running the program because no board member had enough time to give continuity of administration, and it hired its first executive director, Mrs. Goodwin, who continues in that role today with the help of board members and other volunteers.

The now familiar red and white brochure's registration form is still used, but increasingly, registration forms downloaded from

the FCAAE website, www.fcaae.org, have become popular back-ups. Mrs. Goodwin remarks that, "Friends often attend together, and having the ability to get a few more registration forms instantly has been key to meeting their needs."

If you would like to share your expertise, or if you would like to recommend a class, please email Sue Goodwin at: director@fcaae.org. If you would like to find out more information about FCAAE and its course offerings, look for the red and white brochure in your mailbox in late August, or visit our website, www.fcaae.org, to download an online brochure and registration form.

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