



Fox Chapel lifelong learning initiative turns 50

KATHLEEN GANSTER /

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School districts are in the business of education, but it is usually for those in grades K--12.

The Fox Chapel Area School District partners with a local nonprofit to provide life-long learning for the adult population within the district's six communities.

This fall, that nonprofit, Fox Chapel Area Adult Education will celebrate its 50th anniversary.

The classes offered through FCAAE are held in schools and are strongly supported by the district, according to Susan Goodwin, director of FCAAE.

"We couldn't do this without the support of the school district," she said. "They don't charge us any rent, provide us with a mailing address and support us in so many ways."

The program was created upon completion of the high school building after Aspinwall, Blawnox, Fox Chapel, Indiana Township, O'Hara and Sharpsburg merged to form the district. According to Mrs. Goodwin, several residents wanted to extend the use of the new facility to provide low-cost personal enrichment classes for adults.

Those early organizers used a community survey to determine their first course offerings, including a Civil Defense course.

"I think that was reflective of the Cold War fears at the time, but the course wasn't held because of low enrollment," Mrs. Goodwin said.

Eight classes were listed in the fall 1962 class brochure, which was printed using a loan of \$100 from the O'Hara Women's Club. Mrs. Goodwin said they still use the rather austere red-and-white brochure format.

"It helps to keep our costs down by keeping it simple," she said.

The other initial offerings included beginning sewing, two swimming courses, physical education for women, physical education for men, typing and languages.

Today, more than 40 courses are offered through FCAAE.

"Physical education classes remain a favorite, plus languages are very popular and we try to always have some sort of academic component," she said.

One of the ongoing favorites is the Italian language class taught by retired Fox Chapel High School teacher Peter Marsico. Mr. Marsico taught social studies and Italian with the district and has taught FCAAE classes for 39 years.

"I love teaching," the 82-year-old said, "I was born in Italy, but came here when I was 17 1/2. I went to classes here to learn English, so now I am teaching Italian. I think it makes sense."

Mrs. Goodwin said Mr. Marsico is a popular teacher and students often take his courses over and over.

"I love to teach the adults -- they want to learn the language and about Italy," he said.

"They may be going on vacation, or want to learn about their own heritage."

FCAAE board members must live in the district, according to the bylaws.

They work very closely with Mrs. Goodwin to keep costs to a minimum. That includes relying on many volunteers, the backbone of the program for many years. Mrs. Goodwin is only the second paid staff member and although they estimated her position to be 20 hours a month, she said she puts in far more hours. Prior to her arrival, FCAAE employed a part-time secretary.

Courses may be for just one night or extend eight weeks, depending on the subject. An eight-week course is usually \$40 for residents and \$45 for others.

The low-cost and close proximity allow residents who may not be able to afford higher fees or have transportation to drive to other locations continue to take enrichment classes.

Mrs. Goodwin said approximately 700 to 800 register per semester, with two semesters per year.

Ruth Jones was the first president and served for 25 years, said Bernadine Bonessa, another former president.

The late Mrs. Jones put in countless hours to organize classes, find teachers, compose the brochure, do mailings and oversee registration in her tenure.

"She was the absolute guiding light for decades," said Mrs. Bonessa, who served as the president from 1985 to 1993. Like Mrs. Jones before her, she did a little bit of everything.

"I even had my children help with the mailings," she laughed.

But it was a role that she felt was important to the Fox Chapel community. Before she moved to the area in 1984, she had often enrolled in adult education courses in Washington, D.C.

"I think this type of program is invaluable to a community," she said.

When Mrs. Goodwin was hired in 2003, she computerized the programming process, including scheduling and student data bases.

The program now has a social media presence with Facebook and Twitter postings.

The program is a great community asset, but there also are benefits for the district, said Mrs. Bonessa.

"The taxpayers use the buildings and see the facilities," she said, "They feel like they are using the buildings they are paying for."

It is a relationship the school district values.

"The adult education program in our district is truly an extension of the K-12 program," said superintendent Anne Stephens. "Sue Goodwin stays current with the needs and interests of our communities and offers quality programming that reaches a variety of age groups."

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