

Bringing People Together Through Learning

Longtime Glastonbury resident Nancy Mather got involved with the Presidents' College, the University of Hartford's lifelong learning program, when it began 30 years ago, and is quick to say it changed her life.

Mather has long embraced learning new things, from the history of 1950s jazz to why Shakespeare wrote "Romeo and Juliet" (you may find out why in a future class!) to the latest evolution of artificial intelligence.

With its slogan, "Learning connects the curious," Presidents' College offers her and other registrants the chance to pursue their curiosity where it takes them. This path, said Mather, is filled with friendships, surprising insights and the chance to keep growing personally beyond the limits of our day-to-day routines.

Presidents' College was founded over three decades ago when then-university President Humphrey Tonkin had the bright idea of reaching out to retirees and empty nesters who were passionate about learning but wanted to learn without the pressure of grades. Tonkin himself taught the first courses, beginning with Shakespeare's plays.

Since that time, the program has grown tremendously, with a typical semester offering 15 courses and eight lectures. Taught by professors and community experts, the program's single lecture and 2-4 session non-credit courses crisscross the arts, current events, engineering, history, literature, music and science. The program is open to all adults—no need to be a UHart alum. There is no membership fee, and students pay a modest amount for only the offerings they choose.

Tonkin was ahead of his time, seeing the benefits of building connections between the university and its surrounding communities, and in so doing, creating a vibrant community around the life of the mind. Presidents' College fans single out the intellectual exchange and the relationships as key reasons they keep coming back.

"I started attending Presidents' College for the courses, but found a community as well," said Susan Stoppelman of Manchester. "I love being surrounded by people who are as eager to learn as I am. We get into discussions in class that spill over afterwards. The camaraderie is wonderful."

Mather too described the friendships she forged in classes as "deeper and richer" because she had the chance to "get to know people's thinking and understanding." As she has aged, Mather notes the increasing important of these

friendships to her. "I not only made friends with my peers, but also with younger women who have become part of my life."

While its core constituency remains engaged—and engaging!—retirees, Presidents' College also offers an intergenerational opportunity for the greater community.

Michele Troy, Presidents' College director, attends classes with her parents, as Mather does with her son and daughter-in-law, Glastonbury residents Bob and Nancy La Perla. In fact, La Perla, who runs the Glastonbury Adult & Continuing Education program, so appreciated the intellectual quality of the offerings that she pursued partnering with Presidents' College. She features several Presidents' College courses per semester in the Glastonbury catalogue, providing additional continuing education opportunities and introducing Glastonbury residents to Presidents' College.

"I'm eyeing the baseball class in late February with Walt Harrison for myself," La Perla noted. "But also think it's exciting how the Presidents' College can bring the generations together." Her mother-in-law and husband are planning on signing up for Tonkin's revisiting of Shakespeare's tragedies in April and Dr. Mike Magee's lecture on A.I. and medicine in May. "Our lives can be so different day to day," La Perla added, "but learning gives us a chance to come together in a new way."

In fact, many Presidents' College offerings are appealing across the generations. The Silent Book Club is a case in point, an evening of mingling and quiet reading—rather like the "reading parties" touted recently in *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*—that brings readers from the age of 20 to 80 together in venues like Real Art Ways and Playhouse on Park.

Cosponsored by Glastonbury's own River Bend Bookshop, the Silent Book Club brings the generations together in a new way. The Presidents' College Conversations series also encourages people to gather to discuss possibly controversial topics like book banning, neurodivergence or how we can learn to navigate conversations across political and religious divides (the latter two on offer this spring).

As one of the most established and community-minded lifelong learning programs in New England, Presidents' College is distinguished by its high-quality offerings and breadth of its course portfolio. This season, attendees can delve into Jewish American literature or Supreme Court trials that shaped America. They



Jazz professor Javon Jackson enjoys a laugh after class with Nancy Mather.

can stay current on the history of photography, challenges Brexit poses to Northern Ireland, and the evolving landscape in freedom of speech.

Glastonbury resident Bill Marut compared the offerings to an intellectual buffet: "There's a wide variety to choose from, and you can sample as little or as much as you like." His "sweet spot" involves topics about which he knows rather little—all the better to enhance his learning.

Presidents' College partners with other organizations, on and off campus, to take learning beyond the classroom. Students can take a session on opera, theater, dance, drama or musicals, and then join classmates at the Bushnell, Hartford Stage, The Hartt School, and Opera Connecticut for performances. Typically, Presidents' College hosts a discussion on campus of a given production. Then, a week or so later, students can go with the class to see the per-

formance or go on their own. Students say that getting behind the scenes in the discussion beforehand significantly enhances their appreciation of the show.

For her part, Mather is still debating how many courses to take. "You know," she spontaneously exclaimed, "I've never yet had a chance to take a class with Frank Rizzo, but of course, I know him from his reviews in *The Hartford Courant*. So that class on how we can get past the crisis in Connecticut theaters is also tempting to me. It's just so hard to decide!"

For more information on the lifelong learning program and winter/spring semester courses, visit www.hartford.edu/pc. Email pcollege@hartford.edu or call 860-768-4495 with questions or to be added to the Presidents' College mailing list.