

WAUKESHA COUNTY TECHNICAL COLLEGE

Learning in Retirement program perseveres despite COVID-19

Program makes strides in digital capabilities

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PEWAUKEE — Deborah Nicely remembers the date of March 17 well. Last year, that was the day Waukesha County Technical College shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The shutdown disrupted spring course offerings for the Learning in Retirement program, hosted by WCTC and part of the Road Scholar Lifelong Learning Institute. As the office administrator for that program, Nicely and others set to work so classes could resume in some form for the fall.

Learning in Retirement has existed for years, but 2020 was the first time virtual learning became an option. “The pandemic has hit us hard, just like everybody else, especially with our core membership,” Nicely said, adding the program isn’t age restricted; it just so happens many of the members are older adults.

Zoom suddenly became the primary means of delivering educational content for LIR,

but that created opportunities despite the learning hurdles. Nicely said there’s now a new pilot program outreaching to senior centers in the area like Family Knoll, allowing for their courses to be virtually delivered to a demographic that’s dealt with isolation more than most over the last year. There are plans to work with Shorehaven and others in the fall as well.

“Isolation has been identified as one of the largest causes of depression,” Nicely said. “This COVID pandemic has really taken a toll, I think, on seniors in the community.”

At its largest, LIR had about 700 members and has been averaging at about 500 per year. It currently has around 200 due to the pandemic, with 25 instructors. Membership is just \$65 annually and courses are up to \$20.

“We average 50-60 course offerings each semester,” Nicely said.

Courses range widely, from the history of India to cybersecurity to sailing. Retired registered nurse and former

LIR board president Sue Sullivan is currently taking Digital Journey through History & Geography of the British Isles.

“Many of us have been stuck in our homes and can’t do anything, so actually these virtual classes are a lifesaver really and still are,” she said, adding she just finished learning about British literary artists for the class. “It often triggers you for going into other classes or other investigative work on your own to learn more about it.”

Lisa Peterson recently took a class focusing on Broadway. “It was so uplifting,” she said, adding although she’d love the in-person experience, the virtual class has offered a good alternative.

Previously in-person traditions are finding a way to continue as well. Mary Lamb, who is both a LIR member and at times an instructor, said the annual Christmas cookie exchange sees participants swap cookies, recipes and stories. This year, they simply skipped the cookies. She was surprised

Sample Learning in Retirement classes

- Infections Diseases 21st Century, Pt 1 of 2
- Cybersecurity in 21st Century, Pt 2 of 2
- Financial Planning for the Savvy Retiree
- Bead Weaving: Herringbone Necklace/Bracelet
- Historic Trails of Western Expansion
- History of India, Pt 2 of 2
- Victorian Britain, Pt 1 of 3
- Digital journey thru History & Geography of the British Isles
- Photography
- Sailing Small Boats on Inland Lakes

to see all the regulars still participated.

“That need for contact was so strong this year,” she said.

With WCTC planning to fully resume in-person class in the fall, LIR is set to look more normal in the coming months, but with newfound digital capabilities too.

Nicely said the annual kickoff meeting is scheduled for Aug. 6 and is open to the public. Locals are invited to come and meet members and instructors. “They can sign up and register right there,” she said.

Lamb encouraged prospective members to give it a shot. “There are so many classes and opportunities,” she said. “Both for personal growth and just growth in knowledge.”