

Dawn McGinnis Interview

Bolded Text: Interviewer (Hannah Day, OLLI Coordinator)

Italicized Text: Interviewee: Dawn McGinnis

How did you get started with OLLI?

I was thinking about retiring and somebody mentioned OLLI, so I took a look, and gosh, all of the classes sounded so interesting, but I was still working at the time, so I didn't participate in anything. Then in July of 2021, I retired. That's when I was casting about for things to do in the volunteer world, and I wondered if OLLI had any needs. I reached out and spoke to Krista [OLLI Director] and we talked about what my interests were, and we decided that the two areas where I would be the most helpful were in working on the upcoming curriculum, in terms of ideas and reaching out to people, and also working as an Ambassador.

Congratulations on your retirement. We are very happy to have you helping with OLLI. Could you talk a little bit more about those two roles. Being an Ambassador...what does that mean? And being a part of the Curriculum Planning Committee...what does that mean?

The Ambassador is sort of the face of OLLI at various events. As an organization that is all about connecting with people, it's my understanding that the group really wants somebody at each event who can facilitate it in whatever ways are needed...being a welcoming presence when people first walk into the event, and of course bringing any problems or concerns back after the event. Being an Ambassador is a very low-stress thing to do. It's a great way to enjoy the class and it makes people more comfortable knowing that there is someone there representing OLLI if they have any questions or problems.

Absolutely, that perfectly encapsulates why we have the Ambassadors. And then can you talk a little bit about curriculum planning and your involvement there?

In advance of the upcoming semester, we brainstorm ideas for new speakers and new classes, and then reach out to people based upon our areas of interest. For me, I tend to work within the group bringing in arts and entertainment. I prefer phone contact. If I'm reaching out to someone, I call them first and if it's a returning person, I tell them that we would like to include them in the next semester's curriculum, and then send a follow-up email. If it's someone new, I will explain all about what OLLI does and what a great asset it is to the adult learners in our communities. It gets people really excited to hear about this. And then, of course, I give them the opportunity to ask questions about how it all works, and then I follow up with an email. Again, it's a very low-stress thing to do as a volunteer, but it's crucial to bring these speakers and teachers into the organization so that we always have new content to present.

Yes, agreed, that was a really good explanation of the steps and why we start planning so early...to get the content and find the people we want to reach out to, and then all of the practical steps on our end.

Moving on, what are some of your favorite memories from participating in OLLI?

For me, it's being an Ambassador because I love to greet people and make them feel welcome and cared for, so for me, that's an important part of what I do.

For me personally, a couple of events stand out. One was a presentation at the [Mill Museum](#) about the [Blanket Project](#). I actually knew Miriam [Miriam Block, Executive Director] ever so slightly, because I used to work with her husband, but when I saw Miriam at the Mill Museum, her level of excitement and commitment to the Museum was so impressive. And the Blanket Project...until you actually see the blankets, you have no idea how participatory people have become in this particular project.

The other one that stands out to me is the [Lost Mural](#) at the [Ohavi Zedek Synagogue](#). Once again, I had read about it and knew the bare bones of the story. Once we sat down and received the lecture portion that talked about uncovering the mural, stabilizing it, and then transporting it, it was a very interesting story, but it was just so many words. When we went into the other room and saw the mural, it was an amazing experience for me. A very deeply moving experience.

That's amazing. I had the chance to go on the Little Jerusalem tour, and I got to see the building the mural was in. It was a beautiful story, and I'm sure seeing it just tied everything together.

Jeff and Aaron [Archivists and OLLI Instructors] have so much passion for saving religious artifacts within their community. It's infectious. I don't think I've ever known people who have that level of commitment to making sure that an important part of their history would be preserved.

I felt that from them as well. They are both so incredibly knowledgeable. I couldn't believe just how many details and names and stories they knew. It was very impressive.

That's how they roll.

What are you looking forward to with OLLI?

I've found that in fits and spurts, I have ideas for upcoming events or classes that could be a good fit for the organization, and I love to get my creative juices flowing in that way. I also really look forward to participating as an Ambassador in more events. Ironically, after I retired, I started working as a temp and now am fairly busy working again, so I don't have as much time to spend at OLLI events as I would like. All of the ones that I've attended so far have been beyond my expectations.

From the spring planning we've done, it seems like there will be many more interesting classes to attend, which is exciting.

Do you have any thoughts or advice to share with someone who is considering participating in the OLLI community?

One thing that I have found is that the people running the organization are very flexible and if you're thinking about doing it, but there are periods of time when you're not as available, don't let that be a reason to not participate because the flexibility will allow you to dip in and out as a volunteer as your life circumstances change.

That's good advice. We don't have an hour-per-week requirement or anything like that, which I know can be a big barrier to volunteering in other situations.

Yes, it can be.

Is there anything else you'd like to talk about or share?

I wish more people knew about OLLI because the one common denominator I've seen across all the events I've attended is the sheer passion and excitement of the people in the classes. I think that it would be wonderful if more people knew that OLLI was available. These classes, for the most part, are not prohibitively expensive, and they cover such a wide range of topics that there's literally something for everyone. Perhaps in the future, I will have an opportunity to participate in outreach to groups that might not know the potential of OLLI for their members. I'm thinking specifically of senior centers where people are always looking for more ways to connect with their community.

That is a great idea. I saw one of our brochures at the Burnham Library and got so excited because libraries, community centers, senior centers...these are all community spaces and places for connection and to learn. We want to be tapping into these spaces and finding ways to connect with people.