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Exploring Santa Cruz

Exploring Santa Cruz is hosted alternately by Mathilde Rand. We explore familiar and new places and activities of people living in Santa Cruz County through the lenses of a long-time resident. Host: Mathilde Rand.

Mathilde: Welcome to Exploring Santa Cruz, a biweekly program on KSQD, 90.7 FM. My name is Mathilde Rand. My guests are Ginna Holcombe, from the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at UCSC. Ginna Holcombe joined OLLI in 2014. She became a board member responsible for interest groups in 2018, then she became Vice President in 2021, and now she is the President in 2023. Barry Bowman started in 2010. He's a past president; presently he's the program director. Welcome, Ginna, and welcome Barry.

Barry: Glad to be here.

Ginna: Thank you. It's a pleasure.

Mathilde: So Barry, could you let the listeners know how OLLI came about? Osher Lifelong Learning Institute? What is it? Is it only at UCSC? Tell us. What's going on.

Barry: We've been around about 40 years at this point. It really started with a group of seniors who were taking classes and in fact living on the UCSC campus. It was an elders in residence program, and that group got associated with members from the community. They also wanted to take classes, listen in on classes at UCSC. So they started to form a community group to do that.

Initially, for example, they'd meet, I think, at the Cowell Coffee Shop, but it grew quite a bit bigger. They renamed themselves Lifelong Learners, and continued for 20 plus years.

The next really big change came when the Osher Foundation, the Bernard Osher Foundation, came to the campus and suggested that they would donate some money to support one of their groups in Santa Cruz. The Osher Foundation has currently 125, I believe, lifelong learner groups

around the United States, all associated with universities, I believe. The University (UCSC) took it on, but had trouble initially. They tried to run a program that was more centered in Silicon Valley and through the Extension Service.

After a while, they approached the community group, community lifelong learners and said, "Would you like to join with us to create an organization that would allow us to accept this money from the Osher Foundation?" All was negotiated, talked about around the year 2010-2011. We officially became the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute in 2011, I believe.

Mathilde: So not that long ago.

Barry: Not that long ago. So right, 11 years, and it's been a good collaboration. Basically, the Osher Foundation gave the university an endowment of a million dollars, and that's grown over the years. So that generates 60, 70k a year to run the organization. We also get support from the university that is much appreciated.

I should say that of these Osher Foundation groups around the country, Santa Cruz being Santa Cruz, has to be different. What's really different about our group is that it started as this group of people from the community and it continues to be a group from the community with the support of the University and with this financial help from the foundation.

Mathilde: How many participants?

Barry: Well, it's grown to over 600 members. Pre-COVID we might have had for a year or two with about 700 members and we're climbing back to 700 members. I started out when I was still teaching at university. I always like to tell people that I didn't really get to know very many people outside of work. As soon as I joined OLLI, I can go to Costco and meet all kinds of people. People I know now.

Mathilde: You are laughing Ginna. Is that your experience?

Ginna: Yeah, that's my experience as well. I've only been president since the beginning of this academic year. But it's true. Everybody knows you. It's lovely. It's like you have automatic new friends.

Mathilde: So, what do people in OLLI do? What do they get out of it?

Ginna: Well, one of the big benefits of our particular OLLI are interest groups, so-called interest groups. These are small groups. They're led by members. They determine how frequently and for how long they meet. They often meet at a member's home. But the topics have a wide range. There's something for everybody. There are many different discussion groups. For example, book groups that involve fiction, nonfiction, The New Yorker, there are discussion groups about capitalism, sustainability, international affairs, American history, and literature.

Mathilde: Could I say that the activities are built around the idea that people need to continue to learn things?

Ginna: Yeah, that's the basis really.

Mathilde: Like you said, you got to know a lot more people. So, would I be correct if I say, people want to do this in the company of other people? Social isolation, at our age. It's a good remedy for that right?

Barry: Well, you've really said the magic words "social isolation", and that is a core goal of this organization. Two things we want to do. We want to provide educational opportunities, continuing education for senior people. Although I should say, Osher is open to everybody. You don't have to be a senior person to join us.

The second one is, yeah, the Osher foundation is really targeted at people over 50. But we're open to everybody.

The second idea is that social isolation is a really bad thing in our society, it's a harmful thing in terms of your health, and your well being. And so I think that is what is the really special thing about OLLI: that allows this great combination of educational, intellectually curiosity, seeking people to get to know and really know well, new friends really interact with them. You make many new friends on a long term basis, people I met in OLLI that I've known for 12 years now.

Mathilde: Did COVID interfere with your goals of education and social isolation?

Ginna: Because we were very concerned about social isolation we maintained through COVID. Another unusual thing about our OLLI is that we meet once a month, we have an expert speaker. We didn't let that go during COVID. We maintained that, it was of course by zoom. But we kept that going. So we had once a month, excellent speakers.

The other thing we did is we have a newsletter. It's usually a monthly newsletter, during the academic year. But during COVID, we did it every two weeks, and we did it throughout the summer. So because we were so determined to stay in touch with our community. I think that probably served them quite well. Social interaction is a giant goal of ours. We're a very curious bunch. We're a very educated bunch. It's really fun to meet like-minded people.

BARRY: So Ginna, you got to touch on one of the most interesting interest groups that we have.

Ginna: That's right. Our interviewer here is a member of one of our very active groups, Women's Basketball.

Mathilde: We call ourselves the OLLI Hoops.

Barry: We should say that among the 125 OLLI's around us they meet for a national conference and we won an award for women's basketball.

Mathilde: We did?

Ginna: Absolutely

Mathilde: Oh gosh that's great. Now, let me ask a personal question. What inspired you to join OLLI?

Ginna: In my case, it was ignorance. Yes. I have all sorts of degrees from formal education. But the more I learned, the more I realized, I need to learn more. The more I learned, the more I realized I don't understand this big world. So when a friend of mine, actually an ex-President of OLLI, told me about OLLI I jumped at it. Boy, have I not been disappointed. When I first joined, I was working full time, so I could only take advantage of evenings and weekend events. But that enabled me to take Barry's molecular biology.

I've taken every year since. It also enabled me to attend a film series. Those two things hooked me. I became an avid fan of OLLI.

Mathilde: That's true since you're right now the President.

Ginna: I'm their biggest cheerleader.

Mathilde: How about you Barry?

Barry: I spent my career as a professor of Molecular Biology at UCSC. I was at a Christmas party at the university that had friends groups. One of our active members in OLLI, Louis Widom, who is in charge of our courses, came up to me wagging her finger and said, we need some science teachers. We need some science teachers. I've always enjoyed teaching. I thought, well, this would be interesting to talk to community groups about molecular biology. So I started a class that I call Molecular Biology for Seniors. It requires no training in science. I've been doing it now for I guess this is going to be the 14th year.

Mathilde: What's the fun part about it?

Barry: Well, I should say that I've found, and all of the people who teach for us find, that this is such a delightful group to teach to. They're just so intellectually curious. They're so involved. They really want to know about what you're doing. For example, in my area in the sciences, a common reaction among OLLI people, when I talk to them after the classes, they will say something like, you know, I didn't get all of it, but I so much appreciate the opportunity to hear this from the people who are actually doing this kind of research. So having people be so interested in what you're doing and kind of appreciative of the work is just very satisfying. Very satisfying for all of our teachers.

Mathilde: So let's take a break and tell the listeners that they're listening to Exploring Santa Cruz. My name is Mathilde Rand. I'm the host and I am here with Ginna Holcombe, the President of Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, and Barry Bowman, past President and presently working on the monthly meetings. He has been with basically since the beginning, when Osher came in then. Since 2010. So we will be talking some more because we kinda touched on the three prongs: interest groups, the meetings and the courses.

So let's dig a little deeper into the interest groups. You started to say a little bit, give us some examples.

Ginna: You mean, besides women's basketball?

Mathilde: Besides women's basketball, yes. It's intellectually stimulating because you're physically active. It's interesting. There are some other groups like the Walking groups, that's also stimulating intellectually, because of the conversations that are going on...

Ginna: Exactly.

Mathilde: ...during their walking. In the meantime, pumping blood and getting the air into their brains and boy, everything becomes clear, right? But tell us a little bit more about the interest groups.

Ginna: Well, but you did hit the nail on the head. I mean, the magic is that you're socializing while you're while you're learning. I mean, what more but other sports interest groups. We have the walking we have the women's basketball but we also have jogging. We have tennis doubles. Yeah. They're very popular. The walking group has been in existence for more than 20 years, I think. It usually attracts a good 20 people. It goes out every week. We're in the process of forming another mid-county walking group. So yeah, that's one kind of set of activities.

Mathilde: The other thing that is happening is that people are going to different parts of our county, and people are learning. Yes, people talk with each other. You know, this person knows this, this person knows that. I was on a couple of them, where I really thought I didn't know that first of all I didn't know this park exists, and so here I am walking, going up hill, not talking too much, but going downhill is a lot easier. Anyway, I am getting my exercise as well as learning about the place I'm in.

Yes, exactly. The person who leads the walking group, Ananda Paganini, scouts each trail beforehand to make sure it's in good shape. It's not muddy or overgrown. So it's a very popular group. I would encourage people to try it out. Whether you're an OLLI member or not, just give it a try. You'll get hooked. You'll become an OLLI member. (Laugh)

Mathilde: So tell us a little bit more about other interest groups that are really exciting.

Ginna: Well, we have a couple of language groups. We have French and Spanish language groups for French and Spanish speakers. One group that is a service really is called English in Action. It's where an OLLI member teams up with a foreign student or postdoc or even a visiting instructor who wants to improve their English. The OLLI member teams up with that person, decides how often they want to meet, what they want to do, how long they want to meet. But of course, it's informative on both ends. I mean, it's mutually beneficial. So that's one of our groups. It's more of a service thing. We also have game groups. I run a Chinese Mahjong group, we have American Mahjong, Bridge. We have Dominoes.

Mathilde: That in itself also brings up a lot of intellectual exchanges. I have never really played Mahjong, but some people that I know closely, they swear by it.

Ginna: It's true. It's quite addictive.

Mathilde: Yeah.

Ginna: Well, we were all beginners. Nobody has ever played before my group. So I contacted a friend of mine who's a very experienced player. She taught us and there's a lot to learn in Chinese Mahjong. None of us knew each other. Now we meet every week. We are the best of friends. It's the highlight of our weeks. It's nonstop laughter for two hours. The Mahjong we do play but it's mostly an exchange of ideas. Yeah, that's what these interest groups are all about. They're small enough to encourage interacting,

Mathilde: Anything that we missed Barry to really highlight the importance of interest groups in Santa Cruz?

Barry: Well, there are a couple of others that I would mention. Actually, three we should mention. The biggest one of them all is one called Art and Architecture. So that has a couple hundred people on the mailing lists. They organize excursions to galleries, studios, etc. There are a couple of others I was mentioned in. For example, I think the interest group on Sustainability is addressing a topic that almost everybody.... There's an

interest group called the Concept Exchange Society, which is really just like an old fashioned intellectual salon. We will invite somebody to come and talk to us. The most recent one was a professor of education at UCSC. He talked to us about what is the status of schools, what's going right, what's going wrong, fascinating.

Mathilde: In the community of Santa Cruz, there's a significant focus on various issues, whether they're architectural or educational. I presume sustainability is also a key consideration.

Barry: There has been one or something like called Exploring Santa Cruz does exactly like this program.

Mathilde: So Barry, you are a Program Director? How do you create those monthly programs?

Barry: So what that means is we have a meeting open to all OLLI members once a month, we meet on campus and are in a room that'll hold 250 people and we will often get as many as 200 people. If you come, we serve you a good continental breakfast, schmoozing time, and then we have a speaker. Because I was with the university for over 40 years, I really got to know all of the fascinating people who are up here, most of our speakers but not all come from the university. I'll just give you a few examples. If you want to come to OLLI and these meetings are open to the general public, you don't have to be a member.

Our next speaker is going to be Paul Whitworth, who is the founding director of Shakespeare, Santa Cruz. He has a long life in the theater that will be fascinating. We have all kinds of local stars, people like Gary Griggs, who writes a column for the Sentinel. Shmuel Thaler gave us a great presentation on being a photographer. We got to learn what was in Shmuel's trunk. For example, if you're a photographer, you know, a fire or a water rescue. What do you have to carry around? We had Carol Greider who won the Nobel Prize for discovering the function and biochemistry of telomeres, these little ends of our chromosomes and how they're involved in aging. So we've had really great ones. We have fun ones. We try to get a

combination of arts, science, social sciences. One of our speakers last year, music professor Russell Rodriguez, told us all about mariachi music. Who knew that mariachi players went through a period in the 30s where they were doing renditions of European classical music? So we try to cover a lot of things. I can, I think I can say that everybody feels that these speakers have been great. The audience is so good at coming up with questions and interactions with the speaker that adds a whole other level.

Mathilde: So, we talked a bit about the courses. Could you, Ginna, give us a little bit more information about the courses? What are they? How long do they last? Is it always in person, always in Zoom, online?

Ginna: Yeah, we offer a nice array of courses. Through COVID, they were all by Zoom. Now most of them are recorded. They are taught by experts. They last four or five weeks, usually meet once a week. Not all, but we usually meet once a week. They only cost \$25. So we have access to these marvelous teachers and courses for a mere \$25.

We're just finishing up some. One of them that Barry and I both took was taught by Leta Miller, who is an emerita professor from UCSC in music. It was a wonderful course on Baroque music. I thought I knew about Baroque music. I learned so much, but we ended up with the final class in which she taught us Baroque court dances from the court of Louis the XIV. So it was fun.

Mathilde: In the actual class, you were dancing?

Ginna: Oh, yes. Yes, we were on the dance floor making fools of ourselves.

Barry: We have it on the Zoom recording.

Mathilde: So the courses, you just mentioned Zoom recording, do they go anywhere? Can people listen or look at them?

Ginna: Yes. That's a good question. The recordings are on our website. Our website is full of past courses and courses that are coming up. One of the professors that we're lucky enough to have is Ronnie Gruhn, who used to run an interest group that was so popular to talk to, you know, it attracted close to 200 people. Now she does a podcast every two weeks. She is also

a professor emerita in, I guess, foreign affairs, and she knows everything. So she now has a podcast that's open to anybody who would like to listen.

Barry: One thing I would like to add for the courses during zoom. One of its advantages, of course, is that we could get people from anywhere. One of our really popular courses is Roger Knacke. He is a retired astronomy professor and he's been giving classes for several years. One of his classes was on the Webb telescope. It turns out that Roger knew and is a good friend of the principal scientists, John Mather, who won the Nobel Prize in physics, came to join us on zoom for an hour. There was John Mather, in my living room, I could ask him about the James Webb. It was really exciting. We've had several similar things occurring, bringing people in from around the country.

Mathilde: Building a different kind of community from local people and people who are farther away.

Barry: Yeah

Mathilde: It is amazing. Yes. So you said it's on the website. Do you also have a YouTube channel?

Barry: We do. We opened a YouTube channel. You're supposed to have 100 subscribers to maintain it. We now have over 2300 subscribers, well beyond our membership, and our total view is probably approaching 200,000 views.

Mathilde: That's amazing. We probably should tell the listeners how to stay in contact with OLLI. See here, people can email olli@ucsc.edu. Of course, there is a website because you mentioned it, olli.ucsc.edu. We talked a lot and there's not that much time left but people can go through the website and probably see for themselves what we were just talking about. Now, I heard you say something about 125 OLLIs around the country. What's your connection with them? How do you stay in contact? Do you do anything?

Ginna: The way we connect with the other OLLIs is really through UCSC, through our partners at UCSC. I think they enable us to have a much larger understanding of the possibilities really, because I think we can learn from their successes, their failures, and just get really good ideas. It's mostly an idea sharing thing. That we found, and problem solving, what worked, what

didn't work, why didn't it work? Could it work in the future? The OLLIs are all really different. So there are so many ideas out there that might benefit our particular OLLI.

Mathilde: So we have like a minute, a minute and a half left. So I want to hear some final thoughts. Barry, do you want to share some of your final thoughts for our listeners?

Barry: OLLIs are just such a great combination of education, a chance to satisfy your intellectual curiosity, and meet some really nice people, really fun nice people.

Ginna: Yeah, I think that OLLI is such a valuable community resource for lifelong learning and for social interaction. I just want everyone to know about it. So I would invite people to come and give us a try in January. Our monthly meetings are every third Sunday. They're open to the public. Come chit chat. Get some munchies and listen to an expert in January, is very exciting. It's going to be Paul Whitworth, that's guaranteed to be interesting, especially for the local community.

Mathilde: You may need a bigger room.

Ginna: We may.

Mathilde: I want to thank both Ginna Holcombe, President of Osher Lifelong Learning Institute in Santa Cruz, and Barry Bowman, who is the Program Director and past President of OLLI. My name is Mathilde Rand and I was your host. Thank you, Ginna, this was great and thank you Barry

Barry and Ginna: Thank you very much for this opportunity.