

At Age 20, OLLI Celebrates Success—and Remembers the Five Women Who Made that Success Possible

By Joe Castrovinci

OLLI at San Francisco State’s twentieth anniversary is a great time to remember why this organization exists and the hard work that has made it possible.

Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes were founded to answer a simple but important question that Bernard Osher first asked decades ago: How can older adults make the most of the longer lives made possible by advances in medicine, science, and public health?

Osher felt he knew at least one answer: lifelong learning. He saw how this simple idea benefitted many of his friends, not just during their youth and work lives but also during their “third age”—that is, the years after they left the work force. Osher was also impressed by the Elderhostel movement, which was especially popular in Europe, and the strong commitment to continuing education that was an integral part of life in Maine, his home state. Eager to see more people benefit from these examples, in November 2001, he and his foundation offered \$100,000 grants to eighteen organizations committed to developing lifelong learning programs. These organizations were eligible for additional \$100,000 grants if their membership exceeded 100 people after one year, 200 after two years, and 300 after three years.

The Osher Foundation chose San Francisco State University (SFSU) as one of its recipients, in part because it was already serving older adults in many innovative ways. Today there is at least one OLLI in each state, but we like to think of the one here in San Francisco as the “hometown OLLI” since it’s located in the same town as The Bernard Osher Foundation.

Susan Hoffman, 2003-2007

Susan Hoffman was chosen as OLLI’s first director, thanks to her extensive work in higher education, where she helped develop the Monterey Bay campus of the Cal State system, and in the arts, including work for the People’s Theater at Fort Mason. She was thrilled to run the program, which she saw as important for its own sake and as a chance to learn what made people happy later in life.

Susan started her tenure with a practical question: what traits do older adults have in common? Working with Mary Furlong, author of the book *Turning Silver into*

Gold, she concluded that they divided into three sub-groups by age: 50-64, 65-75, and over 75. Each group is different in terms of free time, interests, and financial resources.

Susan was also determined to offer something new rather than replicate existing social service, lecture, or educational groups. “We wanted OLLI to be different,” she said, “and make the most of SFSU’s reputation for exceptional programs in the arts, film, and creative writing.” And while OLLI’s courses today cover a wide range of topics, Susan decided to focus our very first courses on five areas not well-addressed elsewhere:

- Art making and storytelling
- International affairs and current events
- Redefining aging
- San Francisco tomorrow/urban curriculum
- Wellness

Susan also established an artist-in-residence program that included people such as Marcia Liberman, the renowned portrait photographer, and writer Cyra McFadden, who wrote a special column in the OLLI-SFSU newsletter called the New Normal that chronicled the fictional life of Phoebe, a woman who was 65+.

Finally, Susan developed marketing materials using Marcia Liberman’s photos of Linus Pauling, Margaret Atwood, Isabel Allende and others that captured the energy and excitement of life after 50. The slogan “Insightful Learning for Ageless Minds” was used to convey that excitement to prospective OLLI members.

Susan’s work and creativity got OLLI off to a strong start—early classes were well attended and showed how older adults (and teachers) could use their time, energy, and curiosity to best effect.

When Susan left in 2007 to take over the OLLI at the University of California, Berkeley, SF OLLI’s had demonstrated its sustainability and potential for success and was able to apply for a \$1 million endowment from the Osher Foundation. Susan still holds the Berkeley position today, and continues to take joy in watching members redefine themselves and their lives through learning and self-expression.

Debra Varner (2007-2012):

In 2007, Debra Varner, an OLLI council member when Susan Hoffman left, was chosen by a search committee as SF OLLI’s new director.

The issue Debra wrestled with right after arriving was determining the best place to hold classes. Most took place downtown, but trialing classes on SFSU's main campus seemed like a good idea, especially since SFSU was eager to have an OLLI presence on campus and willing to make both classroom and office space available. In a drive to increase membership, Debra launched two experiments: offering courses at both locations, and in the evening as well as during the day.

These innovations quickly ran into a problem, however: the Great Recession of 2008. This thrust a whole range of new issues onto OLLI's plate, the most pressing of which were overcoming a budget crunch, eliminating a staff position, and increasing membership to grow revenues.

Debra responded by reaching out to other organizations that served older adults, including On Lok Senior Health, the Institute on Aging, the Jewish Community Center of SF, Sixty Plus at SF State (now OLLI Plus) and CLEAR, the Center for Learning and Retirement at UC Berkeley Extension. "Our goal was to ensure that people in each group knew about OLLI's unique approach to serving older adults and enriching their lives after retirement," Debra explained. "It was an opportunity to both learn and teach—learn about these groups, and teach them about what OLLI brought to the senior community."

And interest in OLLI was high because most of these groups did not offer classes, or had classes with a very different focus. "This helped us get the word out and develop a presence in the adult learning community that helped carry us through the Great Recession," said Debra.

In 2010, as the economy started to improve, OLLI began offering classes on the SFSU campus, and Debra was also able to attend several nationwide OLLI conferences organized by the OLLI National Resource Center in Maine—a tremendous opportunity to exchange ideas and learn from leaders at other OLLIs.

Sandra Halladey (2013 – 2015)

Sandra Halladey served as OLLI's third director after having worked for eight years in alumni relations and development in SFSU's College of Creative Arts.

Sandra was able to increase class enrollments by hiring especially popular teachers, such as well-known San Francisco investigative reporter Tim Redmond, linking classes to major themes in the news and events in the Bay Area, and introducing lots of hands-on arts classes. One especially well-attended program

was tied to a Commonwealth Club initiative on brain health and how to maintain it while growing older. Other classes were inspired by exhibits at the de Young Museum, and an OLLI day at the Exploratorium that was very popular, especially when Bernard Osher popped in to say hello.

Sandra also took the crucial step of making fundraising a regular agenda item. This effort relied on the work of OLLI Ambassadors—rank-and-file members who would, at the start of each class, talk to their fellow students about the fundraising effort then under way and explain why it was important. The idea was simple: the request for financial help would work best if it came not from the director but from members who knew what the challenge was and how best to overcome it.

Gwen Sanderson (2015-2019)

Gwen Sanderson took over in 2015 and immediately began wrestling with a familiar question: whether to hold most classes downtown or on the main SF State campus.

A move to the SF State campus would have allowed OLLI to work more closely with the school's administrators, who also saw it as a way to save money, have more engagement with OLLI, and provide more staff support. But surveys showed that most members opposed the move. People who lived on the north side of the city preferred going downtown—a quicker commute—and feared that a move to the SF State campus would mean longer and more burdensome trips, especially for people who used transit and had a post-class uphill climb back to MUNI. After reviewing enrollment data and income, Gwen showed that the move was a money-losing proposition, and OLLI classes stayed at the preferred downtown location.

To address concerns about OLLI's budget and staffing levels, Gwen, like Sandra Halladay before her, brought the issue to the members to show that we had a problem. Thanks to conversations in member committees and classrooms, other outreach efforts, and a strong consensus among members that teacher pay needed to go up, a member-led initiative to increase class fees and impose a membership fee was in put place in early 2019. This gave OLLI a stronger revenue stream that reduced worries over its deficit.

Gwen also introduced mini courses as a way to offer members activities between full, six-week sessions. Mini courses also allowed OLLI to try out new teachers and ideas without committing to a full six weeks of classes, and brought in more revenue than full-length classes. Mini courses also became an ongoing membership-building tool because they were open to everyone.

During Gwen's tenure, OLLI also received a capacity-building grant from the Osher Foundation. The second, in 2016, led to an overhauled website and the creation of much-improved fundraising materials featuring members. Gwen also helped establish Vistas & Byways, the merging of OLLI Plus (then called Sixty Plus) with OLLI, and OLLI's Course Development committee.

Kathy Bruin (2019-present)

Kathy's tenure has been marked by many successes, including significant increases in membership, which has gone from 621 when she took over to more than 800+ today—an increase of one third in just three years. Fundraising has grown by an amazing 346 percent in that time, thanks to outstanding work from OLLI member Rosemary Cameron. OLLI also received its first planned gift in 2021, along with three \$25,000 grants from The Bernard Osher Foundation.

Kathy has also updated the organization's logo and collaborated with the SFSU alumni association to market OLLI to its members. Additional outreach efforts are under way with the Bay Area's other OLLIs so that the dollars spent on this effort will have maximum impact.

As a result of these and other efforts, Kathy reports that OLLI became profitable in 2020 for the first time since 2007 and has ended each of the last few fiscal years with a surplus instead of a deficit. Growing revenues have allowed the organization to increase instructor pay by \$50 per hour (or 67 percent) as well as adding part time staff.

The biggest challenge Kathy has faced to date is of course Covid, a potential disaster that OLLI turned into a plus by immediately transitioning to Zoom classes. That took a lot of work because OLLI had to transition teachers as well as students to a new medium, but it was more than worth it because it helped our members stay active at a time when travel was all but impossible and people were isolated from families and friends. OLLI now offers both online and in-person classes, and Zoom will remain part of its offerings in the future.

Another highlight Kathy is proud of is OLLI's weekly newsletter, which has a very high open rate that averages 62%. One recent issue had an open rate of 74 percent, proof that members rely on the newsletter for updates and supplement it with visits to our website.

In addition to the newsletter, Kathy has overseen the creation of neighborhood gatherings and reinstated outings to the theater and trips to London and Ashland, Oregon.

Twenty Years Old and Going Strong

Twenty years after its founding, OLLI at SFSU is clearly on an upward swing, thanks to hard work by its directors and staff, and the eagerness with which members participate in its activities. Stay tuned as we continue to look for ways to serve our members and meet the needs of San Francisco and the Bay Area's fast-growing older adult community.