Adult and Higher Education Alumni Story: Steve Thaxton’s “Encore Career”

When Steve Thaxton began the Adult and Higher Education program in 2010, he never imagined he would end up working with lifelong learners of his own generation. His goal was to teach undergraduates in a college broadcasting program – playing off his 33-year career in local television. But Professor Mike Brady suggested he consider USM’s Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) as the basis for graduate projects. He had heard about OLLI years before from a neighbor who regularly took courses.

Brady’s suggestion led to an enduring interest through personal membership, volunteering and after graduation, an encore career as the executive director of the National Resource Center for Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes at Northwestern University in Chicago. “Lifelong learning is one of the fastest growing areas in Higher Education. And the Osher Institutes make up the premium brand of “LLIs” (lifelong learning institutes) on the select 119 college campuses that host them,” Thaxton mentions.

The emphasis on personal reflection along with the theoretical tenets of adult learning attracted him to USM’s program. “I knew earning a master’s degree was necessary in my aim toward academia. I needed the credibility of a graduate education and wanted to focus concentration on a deeper level than in my previous career – one that rewarded and often required a short attention span for the frenetic pace of media,” he said. “The AHE program stressed exactly the concepts and theory that would help me better understand myself and how variously adults students learn.”

Of the many concepts introduced through courses, Steve found those from Consulting Fundamentals and Practice (HRD 653) to be immediately applicable to his new work at Northwestern University. Readings from leaders in the field such as consultant Peter Block, educator Stephen Brookfield and authors Merriam, Cafferella and Baumgartner all had instant influence. But it was the sustained online sharing between peers that kept him engaged throughout studies. “At first, online courses were intimidating. With a 30-year hiatus between my undergraduate and graduate degrees, a whole lot had changed!” After his first course with Professor Brady as learning leader, he clearly saw the value and rigor of online education: “Those online courses proved to be more intense than the traditionally taught courses in my program. But the ability to have some courses with in-person opportunities to form learning communities with peers and instructors were critical too,” he adds.

Thaxton learned that the vast majority of adult students come to higher education due to life and career transitions – not unlike his own motivations. That inspiration extends to older adult learning in Osher Institute programs designed for ages 50+ as well. He notes, “My academic encore career took an unexpected turn, working with collectively 150,000 student/members on campuses in all 50 states. And the job suits me wonderfully, combining past skills with a contemporary education in adult learning. The USM AHE master’s program proved to be an enormous advantage for me. And the learning itself was fascinating in the process.”