



LAURA KELLEY TRUBAC

Sarasota offers lots of lifelong learning opportunities. But one place was underway before the term "lifelong learning" even existed. And that's Adult and Community Enrichment program—known as ACE—which began offering classes in 1985. Under Laura's leadership as Program Manager, ACE has doubled its offerings and enrollment and had over 12,000 enrollments during the past year with the average ACE student being a 62 year-old female.

"ACE is the best of all educational worlds for people who love to learn," Laura says. "There are no grades and no credits. I recently heard the word 'edutainment' and that's what our participants want. People are willing to spend two precious commodities—time and money—to learn for the sake of learning. The students are here because they want to be here and the teachers are passionate about the topics they teach. Lifelong learning is an area where there is so much serendipity."



pportunities abound in classes, lectures, and tours as lifelong learning organizations offer diverse topics to meet the desires of residents as well as tourists who yearn for knowledge in new or existing pursuits. One such organization began serving the area long before the term "lifelong learning" came into vernacular use. The Adult and Community Enrichment program—known as ACE—began offering classes in 1985. The program is under the auspices of Suncoast Technical College of the School Board of Sarasota County. It's rare for a school district to be as intently involved with adult lifelong learning as it is in Sarasota. Under the leadership of Laura Kelley Trubac, Program Manager, ACE has doubled its offerings and enrollment and had over 12,000 enrollments during the past year with the average ACE student being a 62 year-old female.

"ACE is the best of all educational worlds for people who love to learn," Laura says. "There are no grades and no credits. I recently heard the word 'edutainment' and that is what our participants want. People are willing to spend two precious commodities—time and money—to learn for the sake of learning. The students are here because they want to be here and the teachers are passionate about the topics they teach. Lifelong learning is an area where there is so much serendipity. We have retired people who are vital and have so much to give. These are our students and our teachers. And the Sarasota school district provided our program with dedicated space in the new Suncoast Technical College (formerly SCTI) building resulting in classrooms, a dance studio, photography and art studios, and student work display areas. I call this the magic mix—the school district and people who choose to spend their two commodities to take a class for the sake of enrichment."

ACE classes are available in the arts, personal awareness, travel, culinary arts, home and garden, games, sports, foreign language, small business, computers, and digital photography. The diversity of classes is matched by the diversity of the length of classes, delivery modes, and locations. Classes meet for one or two days or three, four, or five weeks. Morning, afternoon, and evening classes are offered at 22 sites in Sarasota, Venice, and North Port. Several retirement facilities such as the Glenridge and Bay Village, YMCA, restaurants, and athletic centers open their facilities for classes.

Many classes are held in a traditional classroom setting, but some are not. Students in the popular four-week "Classroom on Wheels" field trips are transported on the COW bus to locations throughout the community. A photography class is offered on a sailboat, a series of blacksmithing classes are held at Crowley Nature Center, and culinary arts classes are at Whole Foods in downtown Sarasota. Classes in the arts—painting, drawing, ceramics, pottery, dance, photography, music—are the most popular accounting for one-third of the total enrollment. Technology classes—Internet, the Cloud, iPads/Phones/Watch, tablets, digital camera, Windows, and Microsoft Office—account for one-fifth of the enrollment. Foreign language instruction is popular and includes Chinese, French, Italian, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish. And traffic school for those who need a driving class is part of ACE, too.

Dr. W. Rainer Kroll, a retired SUNY professor and attorney, who has taught ACE classes

in German, Latin, poetry, and literature, says, "Laura, an outstanding administrative professional, heads a great institution in Sarasota County. Indeed, my own involvement with ACE, as student and instructor, has become a very important part of my private and professional career. The variety of courses offered at ACE is the result of great thinking and planning on the part of Laura and her staff. In many different areas, ACE meets the needs of interested citizens in the county."

Despite staff cuts, ACE continues to grow with five full-time staff, five part-time staff, 150 instructors, and a group of volunteers. Laura says it is a challenge to keep up with consumer technology needs and says ACE offers classes, as she says, on whatever folks are buying at Best Buy. Laura's goal is to keep the cost of classes as low as possible so some materials are included in the fees. The program is self-supporting and receives no financial support from any source other than the fees that students pay. Partnerships with agencies, business support, and the Patron program are means to maintain the low cost of classes. Recently a grant that ACE had for many years that provided cost-free classes at some senior facilities and mobile home parks was eliminated, thereby making classes unaffordable for some. She hopes to find a way to continue some of these classes at no cost.

The Sarasota area is known for its world-class cultural environment, but a new initiative wants people to think of Sarasota as a lifelong learning destination. Four organizations—ACE, Lifelong Learning Academy at the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee, The Longboat Key Education Center, and the Lifelong Learning Academy—have recently formed the non-profit SCALL, the Sun Coast Alliance for Lifelong Learning. The group is planning a showcase of lifelong learning opportunities on September 10 at Suncoast Technical College to raise awareness of the diverse classes that make the area a magnet for expanding people's knowledge.

Laura was raised in Michigan as the youngest of three daughters. Her father was a small-town lawyer in Buchanan, Michigan, where it was not uncommon to be paid with vegetables. Her father's advice remains with her today. He said life is a series of chapters and you must make the most of each chapter and the contents. There are ups and downs, but focus on the good parts. Her parents valued travel so at age 11 and again at 15 she traveled to Europe. After attending a Wisconsin boarding school for grades 11 and 12, Laura earned a Bachelor's degree in Sociology from Albion College in Michigan and a Master's degree in Public Administration from Indiana University.

After 10 years as a stay-at-home mom, she worked in traditional adult education for 14 years in Michigan before moving to Florida in 2004. Her son Andrew lives in Eugene, Oregon, and daughter Rebecca lives in Prague, Czech Republic. Her leisure activities are playing Words with Friends online and eating popcorn. She is engaged to a retired Boeing employee from Seattle, Washington. This summer she traveled to Prague to visit her daughter and spent time in five European countries.

So when life seems to have become too predictable, Laura says enroll in one class, expand your horizons, and see where life takes you. ☀

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