

# Dr. Phyllis Brown

**S**he's the Director of (OLLI) at Ringling College and housed at the Sarasota Art Museum. Dr. Brown hails from Rhode Island and has spent a good bit of her career in the New England area, but has been in Sarasota for the past 20 years and at OLLI since March.



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t's a quiet and very warm August day and, like so many places in Sarasota, work and life in general are at a slower pace. But looks can be deceiving. Just six weeks away in late September, OLLI will be buzzing with people who have come for its lectures and workshops.

In case you need a refresher, OLLI is an acronym that stands for Osher Lifelong Learning Institute and is housed at the Sarasota Art Museum. According to their website, OLLI offers "finance, history, science, current events, languages, and more without the pressure of credits or grades."

And a little background on the name Osher. Since 2001 philanthropist Bernard Osher has made grants from the Bernard Osher Foundation to launch OLLI programs at 120 universities and colleges throughout the United States—including Sarasota which is unique because it is in an art museum, not a college. That being said, OLLI is a division of Ringling College of Art and Design.

New and returning students will find they have a new director, Dr. Phyllis Brown, when sessions start on September 28. Dr. Brown hails from Rhode Island and has spent a good bit of her career in the New England area, but she has been in Sarasota for the past 20 years and at OLLI since March of this year.

She has degrees and extensive experience in higher education most recently as associate dean/campus director for the School of Professional and Continuing Studies at Springfield College in Tampa.

Dr. Brown also led undergraduate studies at Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont, and Port Townsend in Washington. Prior to Goddard, she served as assistant professor of education, School of Education at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Dr. Brown graduated from the University of Rhode Island with a Bachelor of Arts degree in history; earned a Master in Management of Human Services from Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts; and has a Doctorate in Education from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

She's been involved locally with the Manatee Literacy Council, Friends of the North Sarasota Library, and State College of Florida and Florida Heritage House, showing her keen interest in history and community as well as education.

Since beginning her new position, for example, she knows the building that houses OLLI was Sarasota High School (SHS) and was once segregated. It took ten years after Brown v. Board of Education, she notes, for the school to desegregate. She's met many African-American natives and transplants in the area who have given her the fuller history of Sarasota. Fredd Atkins, first African-American mayor of Sarasota and longtime city commissioner, shared with her his experience of being bused to SHS in the late 60s.

Lovette W. Harper, a retired New York State educator and fellow Sarasota transplant who for decades has been active in supporting African-American heritage here and elsewhere, introduced Dr. Brown to a variety of people. Having these first-hand accounts, Dr. Brown notes, "Helped with the adjustment" to this community.

While the current calendar year is mostly set, and she always believes in collaboration, not a top down management style, Dr. Brown says she would indeed like to have future lectures that discuss the history of

Sarasota's Black community which, sadly, few people know.

We talk about choosing courses, topics and presenters and she emphasizes again that it's a collaborative effort. "There's a curriculum committee," she explains, that also includes "members and instructors." She adds OLLI is "going with what's popular" this year, thus the ubiquitous, but always sold out iPhone classes, but generally, OLLI follows a "liberal arts curriculum and that will stay the same."


"People love the history, arts appreciation and literature classes, and the walking tours are super popular." A quick scan of the listings in the catalog shows things like "Afghanistan and Southeast Asian Politics" alongside "Basics of Crypto and Digital Currency" alongside "Quiet the Mind, Relieve Stress, Find Peace with Meditation" alongside "Democracy and the Electoral College." And OLLI doesn't shy away from hot button topics as seen in its "The Constitution – Gun Control, Abortion, and Right to Life Issues" class.


Dr. Brown feels strongly in the value of lifelong learning (LL) experiences."It [LL] adds to the quality of life as people age. It keeps people engaged in their community....people grow and develop." And, lifelong learning students engage for the "joy of learning" and OLLI students "desire and seek knowledge; they want to engage with diverse views." The average age of OLLI students is mid-70s and most are newly retired.

Collaboration again comes into our conversation when talking about OLLI being located on the same campus as the Sarasota Art Museum (SAM). SAM's Executive Director, Virginia Shearer, also sees the value of collaboration between the two entities. OLLI offers art appreciation classes for example, but you can also take art classes (with Continuing Studies, another part of the SAM campus) and of course, experience artists and their work on display —making it a true community space. "Our goal is more cross-fertilization," Dr. Brown adds, "OLLI members can become art museum members" and vice versa, of course with "opportunity there for growth."

Dr. Brown heard about the OLLI position through professional job sites, but admits she's always "loved Ringling College." When she saw the position she recalls, "I was ecstatic to work in lifelong learning and be close to my home." Her advisory council is "so passionate and motivated" and admits she's "caught the OLLI fever."

"We will grow in our diversity with instructors and offerings...everyone will see OLLI as a space for them...let's bring them all together — a double rainbow, that's how I envision OLLI being one day."

Her office is on the ground floor and she'll be out in the hallway saying hello when OLLI is in session but adds, "My door is open...stop in and say hello." And if you have an idea, she adds, "I'd like to hear it." 

 STORY: Louise Bruderle

 IMAGES: Evelyn England

## OLLI Open House

You can meet Dr. Brown at OLLI's Fall Preview on September 8, 1-3:30 p.m. on the Ringling College Museum Campus. They'll be showcasing some of their upcoming programs. RSVP by September 5 by emailing [olli@ringling.edu](mailto:olli@ringling.edu) or by calling 941-309-5111. The fall term begins on September 28. For more information, visit <https://olliringlingcollege.org/about-us/welcome-to-the-academy/>