

Lifelong Learning Program Open to All Craving Intellectual Stimulation, Friendships

BY SHANNA O'MARA

In a small room at Brookdale Community College, a group of students and professors recently met to discuss the college's Lifelong Learning program. There were people of all ages, from all backgrounds. Mothers, retirees, teachers, travelers and a former dean – all curious and all seeking more.

"I think Monmouth County residents would be surprised to learn about the wealth of opportunities on campus," said Friends of Lifelong Learning member Sharon Moscato. "The thing I find compelling about these programs is that they attract a wide range of people, but all with similar interests."

According to the school, Friends of Lifelong Learning is a "committed group of volunteers who wish to support, promote, enhance and preserve lifelong learning at Brookdale."

Courses of varying subjects and lengths are offered as well as day trips and one-time lectures. Classes and excursions are open to all at a fraction of the cost a typical institution of higher education would charge. Courses are taught by hand-picked professors who admit they learn just as much as the students.

"The students are so engaged," Nyack College professor Lyndell O'Hara said. "They have life, reading and travel experience. They're right there with me all the time, asking amazing questions. We go out of the box to explore areas I don't often get to when I have certain things that must be accomplished."

When the pressure of enforced curriculum and grading policies is lifted, the professors and students have the chance to explore topics of general interest, not just those listed on the syllabus. Simply put, "It's the best of college – with no quizzes," according to Kean professor Christopher Bellitto.

"There's such a depth of experience in the room, and honestly, I love being corrected when someone knows more and can help us all learn," Bellitto said, noting that many of his students have firsthand knowledge of the topics being presented in class. "Brookdale gets what a community college is. It's a resource for the community. I'd love to see 17- and 18-year-olds in the room with our lifelong learners. It would enrich the learning experience for them. We learn about the Holocaust, and we have Holocaust refugees in the room."

Gale Tenen Spak, former associate vice president of Continuing and Distance Education at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, is the newest Friend of Lifelong Learning and has already noticed the difference between these courses and those in the traditional college setting.

"There's much more participation and engagement," she marveled. "You're part of a group that is here because they really want to be here. People think it is to go back to school and then get a good job. This isn't about that. It's about learning."

Another curious soul, Sheila Mandel, has been taking courses at Brookdale for seven years, as has her husband, who blocks out the week of the Summer Scholars program each year. This year's courses run from Aug. 19 to 23.

"Every course I have taken has had value to me," Mandel said. "I've never wasted my time here. I see a lot of the same people in the classes, and I see people grow. Some come with walkers and canes, but they come."

And they come when they can. There is no pressure to commit to a full semester of classes.

"You pick and choose what fits you," Moscato said. "Maybe you can't do a long commitment, but you can do a day trip, a night course, attend the ballet, go to a 40-minute seminar. This is not just for retirees. Everyone is welcome here. These opportunities are there for the taking."

To learn more, visit BrookdaleCC.edu/LifelongLearning, follow the group at [Facebook.com/BrookdaleLifelongLearning](https://www.facebook.com/BrookdaleLifelongLearning) or contact lifelonglearning@brookdalecc.edu.

