

A Rookie at 96

Newt Minow leads his first OLLI study group—36 years after bringing the lifelong learning program to Northwestern.

In 1986, Newton Minow, BS'49, JD'50, was a visiting fellow at Harvard Kennedy School while helping create the Commission on Presidential Debates. Every day, he passed by a building with the sign "The Institute for Learning and Retirement."



Newt Minow with daughter Mary Minow

Curious, he stopped in and was immediately intrigued by the program, which provided classes taught by group members themselves. An active trustee of Northwestern at the time, he later met with then-president Arnold Weber and told him about the program. "This would be very good for Northwestern," Minow recalls telling Weber. "We have so many people who have retired and want the intellectual opportunity to keep learning."

After Minow promised the program would be financially self-supporting if Northwestern put up its buildings, Arnold assented (the program was later rechristened the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, or OLLI, with generous funding from The Bernard Osher Foundation in 2006). "Now 35 years later, I see what it has become," says Minow. Northwestern University was even endowed as the convening headquarters for the Osher National Resource Center serving OLLI programs across the entire U.S. "This has blossomed far, far beyond anybody's vision."

Thirty-five years later, Minow has returned to OLLI to co-coordinate a study group for the first time, recruited by his daughter, Mary Minow, a Chicago-based library law consultant, who had recently become actively engaged at OLLI.

"We were like, 'We should do something with Russian literature,' and Dad said, 'That would be *War and Peace*,'" says Mary. They agreed that they would co-coordinate a study group focused on the newly restored 1960's Sergei Bondarchuk version of the film. "It just seemed like it was meant to be," says Mary. "Dad has told me all my life that he wanted to study Russian literature, but he's just never had time. I don't know what he's been doing," she says, with a laugh, referring to his prolific career as an attorney, former Federal Communications Commission chair, original PBS founder, author, and recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, among many other achievements.

A Rookie at 96, cont.

The study group happened to occur while the world waits to see how tensions unfold between Russia and Ukraine. “They have 100,000 troops at one of the key battles [in the film], which is the same number that the Russians have at Ukraine,” Mary Minow says. “Dad was deeply involved in the Cuban Missile Crisis, so he’s got an unusual perspective.”

“It was really very brief,” Newt clarifies. “President Kennedy wanted his speech through the Voice of America to reach Cuba, but the Russians had blocked the Voice of America signals. I was given the job of getting his speech in Cuba. We did it through eight commercial American radio stations, surreptitiously. And it got done, and it had an impact. That was what I was doing. That’s all.”

The Minows coordinated the OLLI study group with the help of co-coordinators Stuart Applebaum and Donald DeRoche. Despite his longstanding support of OLLI, Newt admits to being surprised by the diversity and sophistication present in the group. “We’ve got these incredible experienced people from all walks of life,” he says. “Seven of them have read the book. We have one member of the class who came here from Russia and has read the book in Russian. One read it in Japanese.” The group includes film majors and a music specialist with expertise in the balalaika, all of whom bring their experience to the discussion. “I know that there are so many online educational opportunities, but really what attracts us to OLLI is that it’s so participatory. It’s not like you’re just sitting, listening to a lecture,” says Mary. “I have found that I learn much more than I’ve contributed,” agrees Newt.

Mary sees the study group as a form of intellectual closure for her father. “Dad was in the Army in World War II, and when he came back, he rushed through his college and law school as if he had never been away. This was all at Northwestern. He regrets that to this day, that he didn’t have the time to take something like a Russian literature class. This is such a great match to have OLLI.” She says that while some people might think it might make sense for former FCC chair to lead a group on communications, she says, “No, what he wanted to do was explore something he’d always wanted to do. I was so thrilled that’s what OLLI is about: to learn together about something that you have a shared interest in.”

As a first-time facilitator, Newt found the experience smooth and organized. “It’s at a level that I never foresaw.” “Professional and yet flexible and encouraging,” agrees Mary. One *War and Peace* group member found the Minows such an inspiring duo that she expressed an intent to facilitate a course with her adult children in the future.

“I could not be prouder than I am of the OLLI program,” says Newt Minow. “I love the slogan ‘Curiosity never retires.’ I believe that there’s an enormous future here and in our country for the expansion of lifelong learning. I think it’s a jewel, and I’m so proud of Northwestern as a leader of it.”

“And Dad’s 96,” adds Mary. “When he says ‘lifelong learning,’ he means it.”

Northwestern University’s Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) is a vibrant peer-led learning community that generates an exciting and intellectually challenging curriculum of more than 100 study groups per semester, serving more than 1,100 adults on the Evanston and Chicago campuses. Composed of seasoned learners from all walks of life, OLLI members pursue learning for pure pleasure: there are no tests and no grades. OLLI offers engaging, interactive study groups which are coordinated and facilitated by the members themselves.

<https://sps.northwestern.edu/osher-lifelong-learning>

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by Claire Zulkey