

Educational Adventures

by Bill Lazarus
photos by David Carter

The large room in the Beachcomer Oceanfront Inn fills quickly. Outside, soft waves are curling up on a sun-lit beach. Inside the first-floor meeting room, with two columns in the middle stochically dividing the room into two sides, a couple from upstate New York – he’s a retired minister; she’s a former teacher – take seats in front. An older woman, a retired nurse who made the trip to Daytona Beach by herself from Virginia Beach, finds a spot at the end of a long table.

Eventually, 38 people occupy every chair. Ignoring the natural beauty just a few yards behind them, they ready their notepaper and pencils. School is about to begin.

This class happens to be on Charlie Chaplin, but it could be on the Dead Sea Scrolls, Florida lighthouses or Jewish music. Actually, almost any topic will do. If the subject sounds interesting, older men and women will come here, arriving from all over the country, even from as far away as Alaska and California.

It is a silent invasion with none of the hurlyburly motorcycles of Bike Week or the brazen tomfoolery of Spring Break. These

folks are part of Elderhostel, a series of diverse programs that has quietly, unobtrusively and very successfully become one of this county’s largest visitor magnets.

In 2000 alone, the local Elderhostel program run by Stetson University will fill more than 2,500 rooms in local hotels and motels. Each student will pay anywhere from \$400 to \$650 for a five-day program that includes instruction in up to three different classes, along with room and board. Stetson now offers one of the largest programs in the state’s Elderhostel network. And Florida ranks only behind California as second-busiest state.

Many participants stay on for more than one session, filling the days between programs by reserving more rooms. Some stay permanently. Bill O’Connor, director of Stetson’s program, knows of two people who bought houses in the area after coming here for the first time to take classes. “Several people have gotten married to people they met at an Elderhostel program,” he says.

O’Connor knows how far the program has come even to get folks here long enough to become attracted to each other. He

opens his file drawer and finds a small, brochure that advertised Elderhostel in 1981. It's only eight-pages long, and that's for the entire country.

Elderhostel was six years old then. Founded in five New Hampshire colleges in 1975, the program was formally incorporated in 1978. A "not-for-profit organization committed to providing high-quality, educational opportunities for older adults at affordable prices," according to the summer 2000 catalog, it now hosts more than 10,000 "educational adventures" in all 50 states and 90 countries. The program will mark its 25th anniversary in March 2001.

The current catalogue runs 222 pages. And that's only for national activities. The international catalogue adds another 226 pages.

Stetson joined Elderhostel by 1983 with a couple of courses. Bethune-Cookman College also offered a handful of classes by then, but dropped out quickly. Recently, B-CC rejoined the system and now offers two classes as part of Black History Month in February.

Everything else is left to Stetson. That's because Elderhostel doesn't allow competing groups within a designated area, O'Connor explains. As a result, Stetson's program now is one of the five largest in the state. Other major programs are run by Eckerd College; Barry University; San Pedro Center; a Catholic retreat in Orlando; and the Flanzer JCC School of Lifelong Learning in Sarasota.

More than three pages of the summer 2000 Elderhostel catalogue are filled with Florida offerings, including courses titled *Broadway Musical Landmarks*, *The Internet Superhighway*, *Presidential Campaign Tactics*, *The Lure of Antiques*, and *Sarasota: The City Behind The Inspiration of the Book*. Each class comes with a brief description – the sales pitch designed to draw students to the course.

The lack of local competition has allowed O'Connor to spread his program into St. Augustine, Daytona Beach and beyond. For example, this particular week, students were paying \$1,375 apiece to study at the Disney Institute in Orlando.

When O'Connor joined the program in 1996, about 20 classes were held on the DeLand campus. That was it. A total of maybe 900 people a year came here.

Courses were taught mostly by professors and a few local instructors. That hasn't changed much, although far more area residents are involved these days. Each program contains three courses on varied subjects, although O'Connor has been trying to create "theme" programs. One on Jewish subjects sold out quickly last year and had a long waiting list.

Instructors have never been paid much – now starting at \$250 for 90-minute sessions Monday through Friday. "They didn't do it for the money," O'Connor says. Instructors are attracted by having eager students who bring their own life experiences to the classroom.



Bill O'Connor, director of Stetson's Elderhostel program

Stetson was drawn to Elderhostel as a marketing tool, reaching through grandparents to their children. O'Connor says the idea has merit. Some students have come to DeLand after hearing their Nana and Poppy rave about the school. The college also got a surprise bonus. Some of the older students have donated money to the university.

These days, however, the emphasis is more on direct income. Revenue this year should top \$500,000, O'Connor says.

That adds up to a lot of Nanas and Poppys.

Expansion quickly overwhelmed the available rooms around the campus. O'Connor estimated that the Best Inn University on U.S. Highway 17-92 receives 33 percent of its business via Elderhostel.

In 1998, he brought the programs to the Treasure Island and Beachcomer on the shoreline. Tom Staed, former owner of Ocean Eleven Resorts, was also on the Stetson board of trustees

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and was enthusiastic about using Elderhostel to fill in gaps in the annual event schedule. Besides, participants – 55 years or older – are a lot quieter than Spring Breakers or visitors here for Black College Reunion or SpeedWeeks. That's one reason no one knows they are here. O'Connor says no tourist group has ever contacted him about trying to bring more Elderhostlers in.

O'Connor had no idea if Elderhostel would be able to draw participants to Daytona Beach. However, the lure of sand, sun and classes proved to be irresistible. Two initial offerings in the beachside motels quickly multiplied. A golf academy in Palm Coast, only in its first year, sold out within minutes. On the drawing board is a 16-day excursion to study lighthouses along the East Coast.

Stetson also is working with NASCAR, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Florida International Festival and other area institutions to develop additional programs that would otherwise be unavailable through Stetson. A tennis academy is being planned, too.

That's pretty innovative for a small university in Florida, but nothing compared to what's happened to Elderhostel on an international basis. Students can take cruises, climb glaciers, go on safaris and do just about anything under the program's aegis. The multiple offerings have increased the pressure on an individual organization to come up with unusual and attractive classes.

"It used to be 'build it and they will come,'" says O'Connor, a genial man who often spends his days speaking about Elderhostel to area civic organizations, and motoring from one class to another to greet students and be sure everything is running smoothly. Winter classes invariably were filled with visitors from northern states. Floridians flooded summer classes. "They were the only ones who could stand the heat," O'Connor says.

His office used to relax during the summer. Not anymore. The growth in Elderhostel has meant classes are run 11 months a year.

There apparently are a lot of older folks who are interested in taking the courses. There are going to be more. The Baby Boom generation is rapidly getting grayer. O'Connor says expectations are that they will start showing up for classes, too. "They are very active," he notes.

With only three staff members, O'Connor says his Department of Continuing Education is stretched pretty thin. After all, he's also responsible for running the annual Pastoral College and any other special conferences on campus.

"I don't know how much more we can do," he says.

For the 38 people in the Beachcomer classroom this week, what's being done now is already enough. Some people have gone to more than 250 Elderhostel programs. This is the first for both the retired minister and his wife, and the nurse. Today, Charlie Chaplin. Tomorrow, the Elderhostel options are almost endless.

Editor's Note: Bill Lazarus has taught classes in religious history in Stetson's Elderhostel program since 1998.



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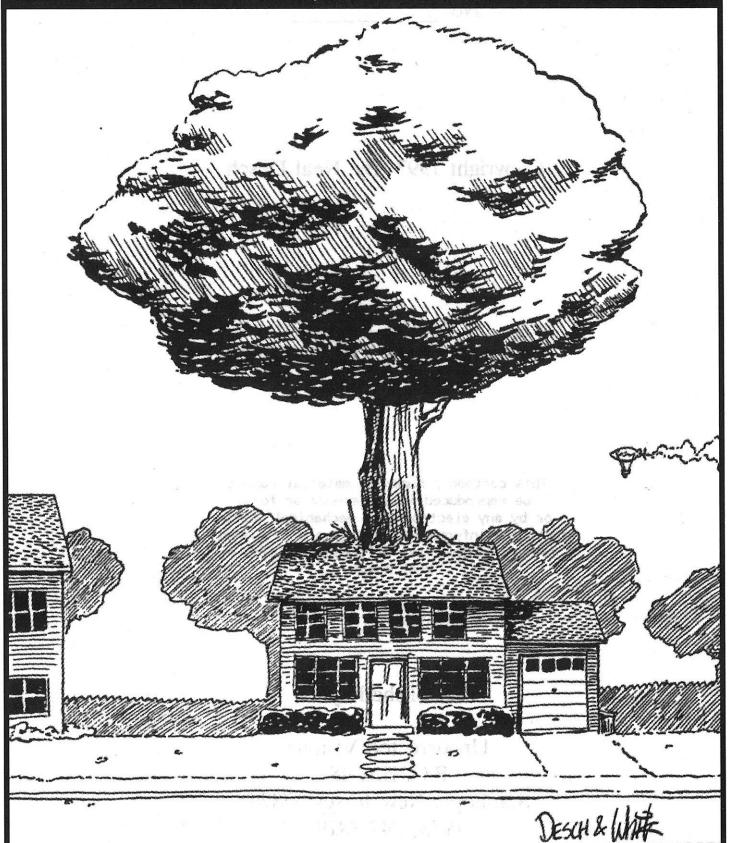
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