

## **Encore Learning History: First Ten Years**

### **Founding**

There comes a time in the history of an organization when the idea behind it seems so manifestly compelling that its success is taken for granted by its current day beneficiaries. The confluence of key individuals and decisions and circumstances of the moment – and luck – often make the difference and then fade before incremental success. That assuredly is the case with the adult education program which became Arlington Learning in Retirement and eventually Encore Learning. Long-time community leader John McCracken unsuccessfully sought funding for such a program from the Arlington Foundation twice in the late 1990s before withdrawing \$1000 of his own for a nest egg.

McCracken had been chair of a Board of Visitors to the Arlington campus of George Mason University and later recalled that in return for a \$5,000,000 Arlington County bond issue to finance construction on the campus, the university agreed to “provide community benefits” to Arlington residents. These ultimately materialized in a formal agreement that the benefits were to include classroom space for ALRI, available during daylight hours.

In March 2002 he sent a letter inviting individuals and representatives of potentially interested sectors of the Arlington community to meet in the old Kann’s department store building, next door to the present GMU on Fairfax Drive, and discuss the creation of a new program to fill an adult education gap he saw in existing programs. Forty responded: interested activists and key individuals from County Board Chairman Chris Zimmerman to representatives of Arlington Public Schools, Arlington Parks and Recreation, George Mason University and the already functioning Fairfax Learning in Retirement program.

Former Ambassador John Sprott, among the invitees, was restive in recent retirement from the Foreign Service. In addition to service abroad, he also had been Acting Director of the State Department’s educational arm, the Foreign Service Institute, which had its own building in Rosslyn. Within six organizational months, he became ALRI’s first president.

### **Building on an Idea**

The idea, put simply, was to establish a volunteer-run organization offering college-level classes taught by pro-bono instructors to people over 50. It was not to duplicate existing programs in the school system or community college or offer “how to” courses or teach languages, all covered elsewhere. Student fees would cover operational expenses for a non-profit, non-governmental entity.

It struck an immediate chord with the source of a crucial building block, Schools Superintendent Robert Smith. He already had discussed a need to expand adult education beyond K-12 limits with Mike Morton, his long-time administrative collaborator in other school systems and now Director of Career, Technical and Adult Education for Arlington. As John Sprott later was to explain, “First, we had to figure out how to function with no office or equipment.” The support and resources the county school system was to offer in office space, catalog printing and copy machines were indispensable early contributors to ALRI “lift-off.” So later did Morton’s office give crucial assistance in registering students.

Crucial too was tapping into Arlington's wellspring of highly educated, energetic "do-ers" to bring their energy and broad-based experience in government, finance, education, accounting, law and organizational dynamics to the enterprise. Sprott became an enthusiastic and vocal champion of these, and all volunteers, who, save for Janice Gentry in the country Schools office, had no previous experience in making such an organization function. "They need more credit than they've gotten. Every person's contribution had to go together," he said in pointing to volunteers' early role in making ALRI more than a good idea.

### **Initial Organization**

Six months later on August 15, 2002, McCracken's invitees had sorted themselves into a cadre of enthusiasts and leaders and he appointed a preliminary board with Sprott as president, Richard Barton and Doug First as vice presidents and Matt Adams as treasurer. Barton brought experience in government, Adams in accounting and First in organization.

Attorney Jerry Greenwald was tapped for legal advice. He was to incorporate ALRI subsequently under the Virginia Not for Profit Corporation Law and obtained a ruling from the Internal Revenue Service that a portion of dues could be deducted as a charitable contribution. He also drafted bylaws providing for a "working board" of chairs of standing committees.

It originally had been thought to affiliate the effort in Arlington with the established Fairfax Learning in Retirement, which had its own building on the George Mason University Fairfax campus. That idea was rejected by the organizers in favor of creating a stand-alone Institute, which would take advantage of Arlington's broad assets and deep support. The Fairfax board reportedly feared that an Arlington affiliate might become a financial drain.

In mid-September, the all-volunteer board was formalized and the first meeting's agenda brought agreement that the overall goal was to give adults a means to meet, learn and socialize. Toward that end, they had to decide what kind of courses to offer and exclude, to identify course development people and to solidify the new Arlington Learning in Retirement Institute's affiliation with George Mason University and the Adult Education Division of Arlington Public schools. McCracken became the board's "member without portfolio."

With a base of 98 members, the board declared, "We will launch a limited class offering in April 2003 and expect to offer a full curriculum in the fall." Sprott said that the founders estimated a minimum of 250 members would be necessary for ALRI success.

In the first week of December, 2002, the board expanded to include Ann Holmes, Jeanne Sprott and Sharon Bisdee as public relations co-chairs, Andrea Vojtko as volunteer committee chair and Lynda Adamson as secretary.

### **Early Years**

On January 17, 2003, ALRI went public, opening its first full calendar year with an open house in the former Kann's Department Store building, where John McCracken had convened his first group of potentially interested invitees. Arlington's member of the Virginia House of Delegates, James Almand, was invited on new, official ALRI stationery to attend and hear remarks by Arlington Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Robert Smith and George Mason University Provost Peter Stearns.

As organizational needs were sorted out, the year brought adjustments with McCracken leaving the board in February to chair a nominating committee and Jeanne Sprott and Sharon Bisdee shifted focus to an evident need for membership development. The key ingredient in meeting that need was the decision by Mike Morton, whose responsibilities included the schools' Adult Education Division, not just to publish the ALRI catalog but also to incorporate its contents into the county's Adult Education Catalog, which went to every household in Arlington. When people responded, Morton's staff signed them up and banked their enrollment fees. "That's how we got the spurt" from near zero officially at the beginning of 2003 to 468 in 2004, Morton said.

By the first annual board meeting on June 12, 2003, the need for operational continuity was recognized by the board and Bob Chatten was asked to chair the academic committee, setting each semester's curriculum and instructors and organizing the course catalog. Ken McLean was to head an information technology support group.

ALRI celebrated turning two in September 2004 with 450 paid members and 91 active volunteers, up from 30 in 2003. Marjorie Varner was named as ALRI's first employee, initially serving part time. By the following year, George Mason University became a core asset with classroom space offered at no cost. A total of 30 courses in seven academic areas were listed for spring and fall semesters. Dues had been set at \$55 a year, plus \$45 a course (Fairfax LRI dues were \$275, including unlimited course enrollment). The 2004-2005 budget was \$63,000 and the administrator's "wages" were changed to "salary."

## **Expansion**

Growth continued. By the annual meeting in June 2007, 58 courses were offered to 607 members over the two semester cycles and there were two or three special events a month. As office space was granted and being fitted out at the school system's Clarendon Education Center (CEC), a former Sears Roebuck building on Clarendon Blvd., work began moving from volunteer homes. Much needed new classroom space became available at WETA in Shirlington and Marymount university. Outreach for new members and public awareness extended to presentations at civic associations and tables at farmer's markets and the Arlington County Fair. Annual supplements continued to scholarships for Arlingtonians in honor of the foundational work by John McCracken and Janice Gentry of the School Board offices, both of whom had died before the first classes were offered.

The 2007-08 winter newsletter noted that the law firm of Sher, Cummings and Ellis had volunteered to act as legal counsel. Joint sponsorship was negotiated with Arlington Central Library for Meet the Author and other lecture series, with the only caveat being that ALRI events in the library should be open to the public.

Marjorie Varner was joined in the administrative office by Donna Banks and new offices were opened in room 304 of the CEC. Of the 30 special events offered during the year, member interest sometimes exceeded available slots. A breakfast club discussion group joined five other clubs already meeting regularly. Fall enrollment had hit 600.

Discussions began to drop "retirement" from the name of the organization in order to broaden appeal, which continued to lag in the minority community and in South Arlington. Meetings were held with Hispanic leaders, trying to expand membership in their community as part of the

ALRI's Community Advisory Council. The Council's broad outreach efforts were chaired by original board member Richard Barton. The ALRI website became operational and 60 percent of member dues and course enrollment fees came through it.

### **10th Anniversary**

As the 10th anniversary was celebrated on March 2, 2012, ALRI officially became Encore Learning. To mark the transition, a new look design and creative expertise were donated by Reingold, Inc.

Encore Learning inherited from ALRI more than 750 members who were being offered about 30 courses in each of two semesters a year. Three to four special events were being scheduled regularly and eight clubs met to serve members' interest. But the core of the organization's appeal, and why membership continued to grow, was the spectrum of courses offered. The half dozen or so shifting members of the academic committee met the challenge twice a year by devising a varied curriculum taught by people they knew, or knew of, or authoritative spokespersons on subjects or organizations of interest. Instructors had to be identified, tracked down, educated about ALRI and asked to speak for free. Other ALRI volunteers often filled the bill, not having to be persuaded that compensation laid in having serious, experienced adults as their students. The hardest courses to organize, but often the most successful in attracting students, were ones like International Hot Spots and Great Court Cases, where a separate authority was found for each of six to eight presentations. Star lecturers emerged, causing waiting lists to sign up year after year to hear Dr. Tom Connally on medicine and health and Tom Wukitsch on Roman history or Steve Dachi on political Islam and global affairs and John Edward Niles on opera.

The John McCracken Scholarship continued to honor the founder's early initiative and two other scholarships had been established with the Arlington Community Foundation for graduates of Arlington Public Schools to attend George Mason or Marymount universities.

Halfway to next year's twentieth anniversary, ALRI/Encore Learning had achieved a robust livelihood. McCracken's foundational nest egg was repaid early.

*This Encore Learning Ten Year History was written by Robert Chatten, Spring 2021.*

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