

Encore Learning History: Second Decade

Highlights of 2012-22

In 2012, members held a party to celebrate the end of Arlington Learning and Retirement Institute's first decade and the beginning of the second decade with a new name: Encore Learning. President John Sprott summed up our past and future to a local reporter: "The focus remains on promoting life-long learning and personal growth."

Ten years later that focus continues stronger than ever as a volunteer-run organization offering college-level classes taught by pro-bono instructors to people over 50. It has grown and refined itself; hundreds of seniors have taken courses and partaken of its many programs; and it survived the pandemic. So in 2022 Encore Learning began a new decade on a firm base for change, growth and expansion.

The numbers help explain the Encore Learning evolution during its second decade. We had 747 members in 2012, peaked in 2019 with 1,050 and remain strong at 860 in 2022. We offered 30 classes each semester in 2012, a number which grew to 35 in-person and virtual classes in 2022. It has provided courses in subjects as varied as global hot spots taught by former ambassadors, cybersecurity, music in the District of Columbia, Islam from Muhammad to modernity, area parks, Impressionism, medicine through the ages and the Bill of Rights.

The number of clubs grew to ten. Special events thrived, averaging four a month. There were art- and museum-focused tours, lectures by journalists and professors, and film previews. In 2013 we moved from offices in the Clarendon Education Center to new ones in Arlington Public Schools (APS) Sequoia Building. We tried holding classes in different locations, but mostly settled into classroom space generously provided by George Mason University.

Some changes – like leadership – were to be anticipated.

John Sprott, the founding president, led Encore Learning until 2013. Under his direction ALRI established itself as an important resource for residents seeking both intellectual growth and community.

Art Gosling, who became the organization's second president, served from 2013 to 2020. Under his leadership, Encore Learning increased its membership, course offerings and social opportunities for members. Electronic distribution of annual membership materials began as did electronic voting for new board members and for changes to by-laws. New sites were found for classes, as well as larger classrooms for the most popular courses. Waiting lists eased the registration process.

When Tom Adams was elected to lead the organization in May 2020, he had already worked closely with Gosling and Barbara Spangler, who with Adams had served as a vice president. They had faced the formidable task of replacing Marjorie Varner, the

stalwart executive director for 15 years. She left in 2019, and the three recruited the talented Lora Pollari-Welbes, who continues in that position.

Barbara Spangler was elected president in May 2022 and leads the organization into its third decade.

Some changes during the second decade were evolutionary.

Technological advances had already changed Encore Learning. Before 2012 members completed paper course registrations and mostly paid by checks. Security issues arose, and online registrations became the way to go. By 2015, Encore Learning hired a communications and data management specialist, and effective with the 2018-19 fiscal year all members were required to provide email addresses. Though provisions were made for those slower in transitioning to online, Encore Learning now communicated electronically with members. The newsletter went electronic in 2013 and after 2020, printed course catalogs ceased to be. After extensive planning and research, a new membership and registration system was launched in 2016. The website was redesigned in 2013 and again in 2021.

Then came the unexpected – COVID-19!

No one could have predicted a world-wide pandemic and how it would affect Encore Learning. When it hit in the spring of 2020, classes were underway. Most had to be canceled and refunds made. During the next two years, membership declined from 1,050 to near 900, and expenses exceeded revenue. Fortunately, Encore Learning received two government loans (later converted to grants) designed to keep businesses afloat during COVID. "When I first was on the board, our biggest problem was space," said Tom Adams. COVID changed that.

COVID could have taken down a lesser organization, but the strong staff and IT committee volunteers provided the support to create a virtual organization. Encore Learning pivoted quickly to virtual courses, offering four courses in Spring 2020 and then a full lineup for the Fall 2020 term, with all virtual plus two outdoor courses. Barb Spangler and Jeanne LaBella were the co-chairs of the Academic Programs Committee that autumn, and LaBella credits IT co-chair Marty Suydam and Executive Director Lora Pollari-Welbes for the rapid response to this unprecedented challenge. COVID's silver lining was that many members preferred virtual classes, and future course schedules will include both virtual and in-person (and some hybrid) classes. Before the pandemic members had requested virtual classes and that was declined, but the pandemic made it a necessity.

By spring 2021 Encore Learning emerged with a full schedule of online classes, but somewhat fewer members. The one advantage for many? There were no limits to student numbers for some of the more popular classes; capacity increased with virtual classrooms. Via Zoom, that increasingly essential tech tool, instructors lectured from their homes, and members at home could still keep their minds engaged during the isolation. It was not like the pre-COVID Encore Learning, where members could see and talk in person with instructors and members and share after-class conversations and coffee with classmates, but it worked – and there were no parking problems.

Some of the clubs ceased for a time – it's difficult to kayak online – or went virtual. Because it occurs outside, the Kayak Club could resume in 2021 once the boathouses reopened. Special events, however, were rethought and repackaged virtually, offering a full online schedule with increased capacity and speakers from outside the region. Members were able to “tour” museums here, “travel” to art museums around the country, and continue to hear presentations by authors and scholars. To support a virtual organization, the staff grew.

And life went on.

Encore Learning remained a volunteer organization with dedicated members/volunteers working within a vital committee structure. Volunteers, led by a strong officer slate and dedicated support staff, kept the organization alive, COVID or no COVID, during its second decade. The volunteer-run committees, with the support of a strong and expanded professional staff, continued to be Encore Learning's backbone. Here is what those committees did in the last decade and how they did it.

Academic Programs. The committee created a schedule of 30-40 courses each semester, recruiting volunteer instructors with passions for teaching. Instructors were compensated with a one-year membership in Encore Learning and the opportunity to take up to three courses each term. In spring 2022, Encore Learning offered 315 hours of instruction, virtually and in-person. Student attendance that semester reached 7,000 instructional hours.

Some instructors taught for years: the late Tom Connally and his medical-related classes; Tom Wukitsch on ancient history (40 classes); and Bob Stone on the Civil War (32 classes). Other long-time instructors included Sarah Parks, estate planning; D Ohlandt, theater appreciation; Karl VanNewKirk, Arlington history; and Scott Wood, music. Global Hot Spots remained Encore Learning's most popular class, filling in-person classes with a maximum of 70 and twice that number virtually. Each class featured a different speaker, many of whom were current or retired diplomats with first-hand experience in their topic countries. The committee also introduced new instructors and new courses each semester.

Information Technology (IT). Over the decade, Information Technology support was led by Steve Spangler and Marty Suydam, and later co-chaired by Marty Suydam and Richard Rubin. ALRI's original registration system had been created by member Ken McLean, who developed a professional, but maintenance-intensive system that worked well for the first decade. “But we were a 'mom-and-pop IT organization,” says Marty Suydam. By 2014 change was needed and we began the process of maturing from volunteer-only support, and locally-developed systems (e.g., website, and course registration and management), to professional software and contractual support.

IT Committee membership ranged from two to six, depending on needs, but emphasized technical competency. By the decade's end the committee no longer developed or ran software but provided technical support to staff. Once COVID

occurred, the committee had a pivotal role in development, training and implementation of the virtual learning component of program implementation. Working with staff, it tested systems and determined the ease and feasibility of Zoom for classes, meetings and special events. That meant gaining acceptance from instructors, staff and members and teaching everyone to feel comfortable with the system, said Suydam. "We set up group sessions for instructors and held their hands so that the quality would really be good," he said. Classes needed a new type of class aide, a virtual class aide (VCA) who could deal with the tech issues of online learning. The IT committee set up training and "hang-outs" where VCAs could ask questions and develop their competence.

"The first year of COVID was a blur," said Suydam. "We all became full-time employees making the systems work. All contributors, volunteers and staff, made it a success...We stretched and pushed our limits on what we could do... There were no heroes; it was a great team collaboration." This effort became very rewarding as we realized that for many members meeting on Zoom was one of the few connections they had outside their homes during a challenging time.

Being virtual gave volunteers an opportunity to work on rebranding and the website. The IT Committee, membership committee and staff worked with a web designer to launch a new look in the summer of 2021.

Special Events, "Our committee is as good as its members, and there have been so many amazing contributors," said Kris McLaughlin, who succeeded the late Earle Young as chair of the Special Events Committee. Throughout the second decade, each month the committee organized several lectures, panel discussions, tours and film screenings to provide extra enrichment. A 2015 tour at the National Gallery of Art, Creative Imagination in Florentine Renaissance Painting, was among many of the excursions taking advantage of local cultural resources. Another tour was to Hillwood Museum for an exhibition of Konstantin Makovsky's works centered on his "A Boyer Wedding Feast."

The Special Events committee also developed a close partnership with the Arlington Public Library, which resulted in many well attended co-sponsored events held at the Library. McLaughlin was particularly pleased with two library programs. One screened a film on the 1970 killings at Kent State during the Vietnam War era on May 4th, 2020, the 50th anniversary of the event. The second explored gender language and power in 2020 and beyond. Librarian Diana Kresh moderated the panel that included three professors, two from American University and another from George Mason University.

"Fortunately for us we didn't skip a beat because of COVID," said McLaughlin, reflecting on her committee's successes since spring of 2020. With assistance from staff and the IT committee, the switch was smooth.

Class Aides. If you went to a smooth-running class during Encore Learning's second decade, you could probably thank a Class Aide. Class aides managed most

communications with class members, helped the instructor duplicate and distribute class materials, and dealt with projector or microphone problems. The Class Aide committee members recruited and trained two Class Aides for each of the 30-34 classes each semester.

By 2017 there were 14 committee members and changes in communication technology were altering the Class Aide role. The days of xeroxing and hand-outs were over. Using a new online program, staff could post class materials on a member's web page and send notices to the class. When COVID's arrival accelerated the switch to virtual classes, the IT committee trained virtual Class Aides to use Zoom and provide technical back-up.

"The IT committee and the Encore Learning staff were essential in moving smoothly to virtual classes," said Gail Massot, Class Aide co-chair. Once classes resumed in-person, Class Aides were key to ensuring a safe classroom environment. Whether in-person or online, Class Aides continued to give administrative and technical support to instructors, and facilitated questions and discussions at appropriate times during the classes. The committee ended the decade with a bank of trained aides ready to assume more tech-related responsibilities required of both virtual and in-person courses. "There are some perks to being a Class Aide, but if you ask the volunteers what they like about the role, they will tell you that they enjoy getting to know the instructor, making new friends in the class and helping an organization they love," Massot added.

Publications. If you never found a typo or error in a course catalog in the past decade, it's because of the careful work and many keen eyes of the Publications Committee members. When the decade began, course catalogs were printed and mailed each semester. Becky Reddick and Carolyn Gosling served as managing editor and members of the committee edited and proofed the course proposals provided by the Academic Program Committee (APC). The last printed catalog for Spring 2020 was delivered just as COVID arrived.

By 2022, members received catalogs electronically. The content was the same – course descriptions, introductions of instructors and the semester calendar – but the production process changed. Now a staff communications specialist receives APC course descriptions and sends them to the committee chairs, Millie Lawson and Ann Kaupp. Then 10 volunteers – broken into five pairs of an editor and proofreader – go to work. After the communication specialist reviews the edited material, it is checked once more by the committee chairs; another editor, Bill Reilly; and executive director Lora Pollari-Welbes. Because the course information is online and not in hard copy, it can be updated as needed, which has been a necessity during the pandemic.

Membership. In 2012, the committee members were doing what they had long done: recruiting new members at Encore Learning in-person class previews. Previews were publicized, and they drew not only current members but prospective members as well. The committee had informational tables and members who were happy to talk

up Encore Learning. It worked. Membership grew.

When COVID-19 forced cancellation of in-person activities, Encore Learning pivoted to online programming, offering classes virtually. The in-person course preview also went online, and with that change, the Membership Committee lost a major venue for recruitment.

In 2021, the committee began to experiment with ideas on how to recruit new and more diverse members. "By 2022, in response to COVID's impact, we had learned to think differently," said Kate Mattos, committee chairperson. "Along with the whole organization, committee members showed impressive creativity. We adapted, stretched our thinking and tried new ways to attract members. We hope that what we learn will serve Encore Learning into the future."

Volunteer. Some 15-20 persons served on the Volunteer Committee helping spread the word about Encore Learning. They distributed catalogs and materials to three locations in the community and talked to those showing an interest. The move to electronic publications and COVID forced a suspension in activity. Now led by Anne Werner, the committee will restart its efforts this fall with the distribution of a flier about the fall 2022 courses.

Community Advisory Council. Stalwarts in Arlington civic, political and community life served on the committee. Chaired for the first few years of the decade by Richard Barton and then by Christine Milliken, it offered Encore Learning connections to the political and education communities.

Giving Back to the Community.

Between 2012 and 2022, Encore Learning added three scholarship funds to the two that were supported previously. All five focused on the Arlington community. We continued our support for the Janice Gentry Fund, which helps low income Arlington residents pay the fees for career and technical training. We also increased our contributions to the Encore Learning Scholarship Fund, which goes to an Arlington County public high school graduate planning to attend either Marymount University or George Mason University. This fund was renamed the Arthur W. Gosling Fund in 2020 to honor our late President Art Gosling.

The three newer funds connected Encore Learning directly to George Mason University. The John T. McCracken Memorial Endowment goes to an undergraduate at George Mason who graduated from an Arlington County public high school and who demonstrates community and civic engagement in Arlington County. The George Mason University Schar School of Policy and Government Alumni Scholarship Fund awards scholarships to graduate students at the Schar School, and the third, the Dr. John T. Spratt Encore Learning Scholarship Fund, gives a scholarship annually to a graduate student at George Mason pursuing a degree in government, policy or international affairs. The latter scholarship was established in 2014 for a ten-year period to honor founder and longtime President John Spratt when he stepped down from being President.

Looking Forward.

“We had a few bumpy years with COVID-19, but we survived and are stronger,” said Barbara Spangler, the new President of Encore Learning. “We’ve demonstrated our ability to provide intellectually stimulating programs, clubs, and Special Events despite challenges. Who knew we’d become Zoom experts? We’re ready for the next decade!”

This Encore Learning Second Decade History was written by Jody Goulden, Summer 2022.

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