

Community Links

Ageing well together



MONTHLY NEWS FOR SENIORS

College' s oldest student shows it' s never too late to stop learning

Earle Wagner has been an avid reader since his childhood in West LaHave, N.S., in the early 1930s, a time when finishing an education was a luxury.

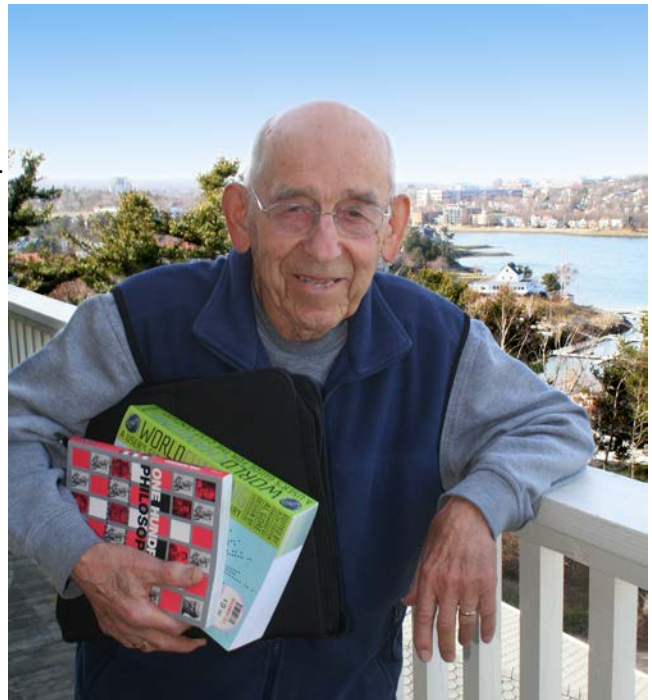
So it wasn't surprising more than 70 years later, after a distinguished sailing career, that he become one of the most enthusiastic scholars at the Seniors College Association of Nova Scotia, and certainly, at the age of 90, its oldest student.

His story is typical, says Dr. Roland Lewis, college president. Many of its 700 members had to quit high school or forego a formal education to raise families and pursue careers. Wagner is not so typical in another way: 80 per cent of the college's students are women.

Formed in 2007 mainly by retired Dalhousie

University professors, the college is aimed at serving people over 50 and offers a total of 75 courses, about 25 in each of three semesters in locations from Truro to Liverpool. For a fee of of \$135 per year, members can take all the courses they want. Membership fees are used almost entirely to rent classroom space.

"We teach anything from astronomy to Zionism," says Dr. Lewis, a retired clinical microbiologist who teaches the course in his field and has enrolled in classes like Greek and Roman history. Not all the instructors are academics. Some of the most popular courses, one on railways, another on the history of photography are taught by enthusiasts. Other popular topics include the history of Nova Scotia, Judaism, taught by a rabbi, and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In addition to full courses the college offers eight to ten two-hour lectures per year, open to all.



Ideas for new courses are reviewed by a curriculum committee. They ask new teachers for a resume, but there's no requirement for an advanced degree.

"I have great respect for these people— they are number one in their fields," says Wagner of the instructors. "They have spent their lifetimes learning about their fields and they love what they do." Wagner obviously loves learning and his tastes are broad. He has taken some 30 courses since the college began including world religions, poetry and writing as well as lots of science and math. His next class is called The Fall of Patriarchy and the Rise of Violence Against Women.

The school would like to expand to the Annapolis Valley, New Glasgow, Antigonish, Cape Breton and Yarmouth, says Dr. Lewis, but they haven't attracted enough interest to offer courses. Since most courses are offered during the daytime, finding space is difficult and expensive. The school sometimes uses public library lecture rooms, but libraries won't allow paid lectures so as many as half the people in those classes are unpaid drop-ins.

For many students the college is a social outlet, with coffee breaks during the two-hour lectures. Last year the school had its first annual dinner and dance with live music.

But Wagner says he's there to learn. When World War II broke out he tried to join the Navy but was a year too young. The next year he was hired by Imperial Oil and served as an able seaman on oil tankers making the dangerous run through U-boat infested waters along the U.S. eastern seaboard. In one day in the spring of 1943 he spotted the remains of 14 tankers just like his, partly submerged in the shallow ocean waters just ten miles off the coast of West Virginia. One tanker, life-boat davits empty, was still spewing smoke and fire as his ship cruised by. Anti-submarine aircraft flew overhead, indicating an enemy sub was still in the area.

Earle's good study habits helped him qualify as captain. He skippered large Esso oil tankers and other freighters in every ocean of the world except the Antarctic, before joining the federal government to manage its fleet off fisheries patrol and research vessels. He and his wife Ruth, now passed on, had four children and he now has four grandchildren in the early stages of their careers.

[Community Links](#) is a provincial organization that promotes healthy, age friendly communities and quality of life for Nova Scotia seniors through community development and volunteer action.

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