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Sprightly seniors yearning for learning

THE ROOM is bursting at the seams.

I swear, there isn't space for *one* more individual to get in.

Yet *still* they come, squeezing their way good-naturedly into the heaving mass.

Trapped at the back, I flatten myself against the wall, my shirt limp with sweat.

There must be 70 people stuffed into confines that were designed for half that number.

Who knew higher education could be this popular?

So much enthusiasm.

So much energy.

So many — seniors!

That's right; these aren't young people trying to register for the courses on offer.

This surging tide is made up of older Nova Scotians, mature men and women, apparently still hungry for knowledge.

Welcome to something quite extraordinary for Nova Scotia. What's happening in this late-September madhouse is nothing less than the creation of a college for those aged 50 and older.

At the front of the room, Robert Rodger, Sid Sodhi and Blanche Potter are working



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feverishly, handling the registration forms and \$60 fees being thrust at them.

Blanche is the fledgling college's registrar, while the two men, both retired Dalhousie University professors of psychology, are guiding its birth. All three are delighted at the turnout, delighted and astonished.

"We were expecting maybe 20 people," Sid tells me as the crush eases.

Like his cohorts, Sid is frustrated by the tremendous waste of talent and wisdom that seniors represent to the community at large.

"They're an *incredible* asset," he exclaims. "I don't think our leaders understand."

The new organization intends to open its doors to this steadily growing resource and

feed it the knowledge it still craves.

In other words, it's lubrication time for mature brains but with a nice twist: no exams, no homework and no grades!

The college offers learning for the sheer joy of it all and is modelled on a similar one on Prince Edward Island with an impressive curriculum of 100 courses.

The Halifax version will start with just four weekly courses, namely: Islam, Peace and Terrorism; Interpreting the King James Bible as Literature; Managing Your Money; and Writing for Life.

They'll run between eight and 10 weeks for two hours a week, from the first week of October into December. One class will be held in the community room of the Sobeys store in Clayton Park; the other three at the Bloomfield Centre in Halifax.

Eventually, if the interest is there, courses might even be offered around the province, says Sid.

"Why these four particular courses?" I ask him.

He tells me the selection was partly due to the availability of instructors, partly suggestions

from the public.

Robert joins us with the news that almost 100 people will likely be registered before the afternoon is over.

That's encouraging, he beams, because the money changing hands in this room isn't a tuition charge; it's a membership fee.

"Members *own* the college," he emphasizes.

And that's what makes all this so special. The college is set up as a non-profit, self-governing affair. Those who've paid the \$60 will elect their own board of directors who, in turn, will hire a program co-ordinator and choose future courses.

One of those standing in line this afternoon is June Pedde, a retired Halifax nurse who's applying to take the class on Islam.

She audited a course at Mount Saint Vincent University a few years ago and greatly enjoyed the experience, except that it was a bit on the expensive side. She's expecting this new college will prove a reasonably priced alternative in her late-life quest for learning.

"It's for knowledge to *expand* my knowledge," she says.



You're never too old to learn or to start a new seat of learning! These three retirees, Blanche Potter, Robert Rodger and Sid Sodhi, are involved in starting a new Halifax college just for seniors. (PETER DUFFY)

Sitting nearby are Janet Dowling, 65, and Maureen MacIsaac, 59.

Janet's a retired social worker, while Maureen's a retired hairdresser. Both hope to register for the writing course because, not only are they both trying to write books, but also each is suffering from writer's block.

Janet's book is aimed at young single parents. Maureen wants to tell the story of how she developed a speech problem called spasmodic dysphonia after undergoing botox injections, 12 years ago.

"The after-effects were like poison," she says with great difficulty.

There's another incentive for Maureen to be here today. She had a heart attack 18 months ago and now appreciates that life is too precious to waste, sitting home waiting to die.

"I want to *learn*," she says with passion.

"Then you'd better hurry," I warn, glancing over her shoulder. "There's another mob of seniors coming through the door!"

Footnote: The response has been so great that the new college is already oversubscribed.

Peter Duffy appears Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday. (pduffy@herald.ca)