TRIBUTE TO MARILYN BLUMSACK

Marilyn Blumsack, longtime Director of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Tufts University, retired in November 2011. In tribute to her 10 years of creative and visionary leadership we dedicate this issue of Osher Outlook to her.

Congratulations Marilyn

Marilyn Blumsack
honored by
Tufts University
Alumni Association
as
2012 Recipient of
Distinguished Service Award

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Marilyn Blumsack: An Appreciation

by Maralyn Segal

Marilyn: Where would we be without her vision, her energy, her intelligence, and her devotion? Even our current name, Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Tufts University, reflects the distance we have come under her leadership.

The new Learning in Retirement Program opened at Tufts in the fall of 2000. A recent retiree, I joined, and was here when Marilyn became director in 2001. So I have been in a good position to watch how Marilyn used her talents to build our program, to make it have value to Tufts University, and to guide it to a position of prominence in the national Osher network of Institutes for Lifelong Learning. Here are some of the things I have observed.

Marilyn made it her business to know everyone. She was a one-woman hospitality committee, shedding her warmth on all who enter. She tuned in to everyone’s interests (the better to involve us, of course), and sincerely tried to make us all happy campers.

Marilyn was an active member of many volunteer committees vital to the Osher LLI program. The Curriculum committee is a good example. With more than ten years of programs ensconced in her memory and her complete grasp of members’ talents, Marilyn was an invaluable resource, suggesting courses, spotting potential study group leaders and encouraging members to step up to the next level. This was a huge contribution to the committee’s mandate to put together a roster of interesting and varied courses four times a year.

Marilyn worked tirelessly to advance the program. She was integral in attracting the grant from the Bernard Osher Foundation that gives us some financial stability. Marilyn worked equally hard to build membership. “More members mean more potential study group leaders” was her mantra. She spoke to community groups, brought study groups leaders to spend a day with them, and organized traveling mini-programs for distant alumni groups. Recent specialized courses for the “not-yet retired” have introduced our program to a new group of potential future participants.

Under Marilyn’s direction, and as a result of her creativity, the program sprouted wings: literal wings, as in the Travel/Learn trips to England and the Continent; metaphorical wings, as in the e-Learning courses and on-line book club that involve people all over the world. A satellite campus at Brookhaven allows us to offer a third day of courses. The range of courses itself expanded through the addition of Tufts graduate students as study group leaders in specialized subjects. Marilyn was very receptive to suggestions from members, leading to such non-classroom activities as the EDventures and Friendship programs.

Lastly, Marilyn kept us connected with the Tufts University community, the Brookhaven community, the surrounding cities and towns, the other Lifelong Learning programs in the region and the country, and the Bernard Osher Foundation.

Are you exhausted yet?

It is hard to believe that this is only a partial list of Marilyn’s activities and accomplishments. It is by no means a comprehensive list, which makes it all the more impressive. Many of you could write your own lists of entirely different accomplishments, just as long and just as impressive.

In her new life as a retired person, Marilyn says she is looking forward to taking classes and participating on a committee or two. I look forward to seeing her in her new role.
We, the Tufts Osher LLI Community, congratulate Marilyn Blumsack on her selection by the Tufts University Alumni Association to receive a 2012 Distinguished Service Award.

Marilyn Blumsack was nominated for the Distinguished Service Award by Tim Brooks, Executive Director of Alumni Relations, and by Robyn Gittleman, Director of the Experimental College.

Excerpts from their Letter of Nomination:

[For] her decade of service as the Director of the Osher Institute of Lifelong Learning, here at Tufts... providing a very compelling mechanism to engage Tufts alumni in their retirement years in such interesting and enriching educational programs.

It was thanks to Marilyn Blumsack ... that the whole program was able to take off and become the robust program it is today. Her creative touches early on, provided the added value of a social community, before, between and after the courses.

Marilyn then led the charge to get the promise of a $1 million endowment from the Osher Foundation in 2005, provided that the enrollment in the program could be increased to 500 or more members annually. Through Marilyn’s smart marketing efforts, and by partnering with the Brookhaven Retirement Community, she was able to do that, which opened the door to an amazing growth in the overall program, including travel programs to exciting destinations abroad, Lunch and Learn, Summer Sessions, and more.

Marilyn is a warm and caring person. She helps create an atmosphere of friendliness, casual professionalism, and genuine personal attention to the members of Osher. She has delivered the goods, with boundless energy and always with a profound love of Tufts University.

Marilyn in Florida with study group leaders, Dorothy Burnstein and Ken Fettig, Executive Board Chair Emeritus who brought Osher Study Groups to Tufts University Alumni in Florida.
Before we had heard of Osher. Before TILR became TILL. Before the Tufts University Osher Lifelong Learning Institute under whatever name flung its E-Learning Empire to Europe and Asia and almost every state in the US.

Before Sophia Gordon Hall. Before renovations to Alumnae Lounge, before EDventures, or online study groups. Before fabulous trips to old England, to Newport, to China, to Spain. Before Ambassador ventures into local communities.

Before all this, there was TILR—Tufts Institute for Learning in Retirement. And there was Marilyn Blumsack, who more than ten years ago became its helmsman, midwife, gardener, idea woman, organizer, implementer, energizer, and more, all under the most inadequate title of Director. She may not have invented quite all those changes but she implemented an amazing variety of expansions and reinventions.

I was on one leg then, plus crutches, when I first joined TILR. Newly widowed. Newly retired. Newly adapting to new body parts, I have to admit the closeness to my house and the seeming plenitude of parking at Tufts was a temptation for my recuperation.

Little did I know what a remarkable and fun journey I was about to embark on, or what an amazing woman would welcome me into a new chunk of my life.

The Tufts Learning in Retirement program was then a toddler of two years. There were at most sixty of us—scattered into about fifteen peer led study groups, most conducted in the dank bowels of Aidekman Hall. We were welcomed into the program by a trim, energetic golden haired, suntanned woman who looked about 40 with the energy of a 20 year old. She appeared to know almost everyone by name, warmly introduced herself to those she did not know, and better yet introduced people to each other with a sure sense of possible connection.

I don’t really believe in auras, but Marilyn created one around this institution—an aura of warmth and excitement, of bringing people together in a shared venture of learning and caring. I barely remember what courses I first took, but I certainly do remember Marilyn of those early years the verve and energy, the graciousness that made both “newbies” and “oldies” feel special and welcome and part of a caring community.

In the tumultuous years since then—years that included serious financial difficulties for the program as well as immense personal tragedies for Marilyn—she swept so many of us into hours of volunteer labor, teaching courses, serving on committees, leading tours, planning and hosting social events, or creating new programs. She knew her constituents and their interests and in her inimitable way managed to transform naysayers to say-sayers without their quite realizing their arms had been twisted and their lives committed.

Somehow I got cajoled into editing SPOTLIGHT, which being produced in Marilyn’s office, gave me ample chance to observe this amazing dynamo at work. And what work! Stage managing one hundred details at a time: wrestling space and equipment for classes, inveigling scholars from the Fletcher school and other parts of the university, arranging celebrations, arranging transportation, nurturing a mutually beneficial relationship with Brookhaven; personally helping Study Group Leaders become more effective, meeting with deans, police, annexing office space, helping find presenters for Lunch and Learn. All this and the management of a variety of volunteer committees, including the Curriculum Committee and the Executive Board.

To Marilyn Blumsack
With Thanks and Appreciation

by Arline Heimert

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Memories, Appreciation, Thanks

Jayson Brodie, Executive Chair

Like for so many other “students” at our life long learning institute, Marilyn Blumsack was my first contact with the program over ten years ago. She was there directing me and many others to the correct classrooms. Marilyn was everywhere, taking this fledging program and pushing it forward.

Guiding it would be too modest a description for Marilyn’s influence from the very start of her tenure as Director. In ensuing terms, I took additional courses and before not long, Marilyn reached out and encouraged me to join the curriculum committee and that was just the beginning. Marilyn’s soft sell quickly engulfed many others and soon the committees were fully staffed.

From encouraging members to join committees to convincing so many that they, as study group leaders, had something to share, she did it all. Marilyn was also very busy writing grant requests, seeking support for the program. Very soon she “grabbed the gold ring” by securing a major grant from the Osher Foundation. Along with the program’s significant growth, Marilyn’s dedication and contributions have continued to grow.

Thank you, Marilyn

Behind this continuously enlarging program, there is a stunning amount of community outreach with the community ambassador program, talks at retirement facilities aimed in part at increasing membership, participation with other parts of the university in a variety of community service projects; negotiations with the Osher Foundation, coordination with Brookhaven in creating “special events” and with the Alumni office for speaking trips; thank you gifts to outside helpers etc—a million details that as beneficiaries of the program we are blissfully unaware.

So what didn’t Marilyn do? Well, she didn’t fix parking tickets.

I know that growing this program haunted Marilyn just about all day everyday. She would wake up thinking about interesting courses or workshops, enjoyable excursions, or whom she could ask to volunteer for what. Driving into work she was on the phone developing and exchanging ideas for the program’s benefit. I know that every television or radio program imbibed, book or magazine read might inspire additions to the program. While all program events may not have directly been her brainchildren, in almost every case she had a vital hand in implementing them with ideas and personnel.

It is hard to let go of the children one has nurtured. With immense growth from a few dozen to nearly 500 members and program demands, the program will inevitably change.

Marilyn will continue as part of the family—helping and advising, lending some of her extraordinary knowledge, contacts, and memory. At last she will be able to partake from the marvelous feast of programs and excursions she played such a huge role in creating, something she never had time to do as Program Director.

For me, it’s been a labor of love. This is an incredible community of students.

—Marilyn Blumsack
To MARILYN with THANKS
from BROOKHAVEN

MENTOR and coach she’s been to so many,
No challenge too daunting, no burden too heavy.

With AMAZING grace, great skill and good cheer,
She’s directed Tufts Osher LLI for over 10 years.

Our dear MB has a talent quite RARE,
She treats each in her circle with tender loving care.

She’s INSPIRED and convinced many more than a few,
To jump on board and be part of the Tufts OLLI crew.

Her LOYALTY to both the program and to us,
Is worthy of praise and has earned our trust.

To creative ideas she enthusiastically says, YES,
She believes in her team, she knows they’re the best.

There’s NEVER been a single moment of doubt,
It’s to lifelong learning she is so devout.

MARILYN, our friend and colleague for these many years,
We are in awe of what you’ve accomplished,
Through much shared laughter and just a few tears.

Tufts and Brookhaven have become an enviable team,
Achieved through hard work and belief in a dream.

As you enjoy some much deserved rest,
Savor each memory, ‘cause you’ve given your best.

So three cheers and a bravo go with our thanks to you,
Today and always, hugs and kisses too.

by Lynne Romboli
A Photographic Tribute to Marilyn

Osher Outlook

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