**It Takes a Village to Run an OLLI**

*Two OLLI volunteers and donors- Sue Robinson-Neeb and Ray Smythe- share thoughts about the rewards of giving support to the OLLI program.*

**A POLAND**: two volunteers are about to share a secret equation. What they give to the program is actually far less than what they receive.

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**A POLAND**: Welcome to *In Conversation: The Voices of OLLI*. OLLI, O-L-L-I is an acronym for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute located at and networked with the Palm Desert Campus of California State University, San Bernardino.

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**A POLAND**: If you have taken courses at OLLI, you probably know Ray Smythe. Amongst his many contributions to the program, this author and retired teacher from Portland, Oregon, volunteers as an OLLI ambassador. He is that person who signs in and greets you before class. Ray adds his own personal touch when he began with his high school students. He hands out a quote card to each member. The card contains an inspirational saying, offering a magical welcome to every class. We felt it would be appropriate if Ray begins this conversation with such a quote.

**R SMYTHE**: If you want to touch the past, touch a rock. If you want to touch the present, touch a flower. If you want to touch the future, touch a life.

**S ROBINSON NEEB**: I’m sure you’ve changed a lot of lives and touched a lot of people with those memories and cards you’ve passed out. It is wonderful to receive them.

**A POLAND**: that is Sue Robinson-Neeb. She is a born and bred Californian, now retired from a career in Human Resources. Sue gives much of her time to the OLLI program, not only as a devoted student and donor but, also as a volunteer. She is the leading voice on the curriculum committee. That’s the member driven group that shapes what courses and instructors are featured in each semester’s catalog. Not only does Sue help pick the classes, she also enrolls in many of them. So, here is the give and take, so to speak, of Ray and Sue. Let’s listen in.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: I didn’t get the opportunity to go to university when I was young. So, this is kind of me making up for lost time.

**R SMYTHE**: Aha.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: I love that I get to see a variety of subjects and interesting teachers and short six-week classes. I don’t have to be committed for twenty weeks or something and I really enjoy that. I’m making up for lost time.

**R SMYTHE**: You nailed it Sue because somebody that I really respect, besides Sue of course.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: Of course.

**R SMYTHE**: Who I think is fabulous. I really do think she is fabulous even though I give her a bad time.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: Everyone gives me a bad time. (LAUGHS)

**R SMYTHE**: But you are wonderful. Anyway, I have always believed that helping others makes your life and their life better.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: I think that, that is part of what OLLI is all about too. Making connections, being social, and lifting people up. I think OLLI does it through the classes they offer, activities they offer, through the get-togethers and all that. I think it’s all about making connections with people and making them feel important. I miss not seeing you too honey.

**R SMYTHE**: Yeah ok, thanks.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: What’s your favorite one? Do you like being an ambassador? Do you like being on the curriculum committee? What is your favorite role?

**R SMYTHE**: My favorite role is the ambassador because I get to pass out the cards, and get to talk to people and hear interesting stories.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: I think that is fabulous. So, I’m wondering, how do you feel being on the curriculum committee?

**RAY SMYTHE**: I like being on the curriculum committee because I enjoy trying to decide what courses are best for people and what courses would interest people. I like the discussions, plus as you know Sue, it’s fun to discuss the classes, we can laugh about them and so forth. You know, we sometimes find a class that isn’t going to fit. I feel bad kind of bad sometimes to say no, but you have to go with your conscious.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: Yes. I think that’s one of the biggest challenges for us on the curriculum committee is to keep a variety of classes, a variety of teachers, and keep it interesting, and keep it stimulating. So, it is a real challenge and we do get into some fun and lively discussions to be sure.

**R SMYTHE**: Even though I am an outgoing person, sometimes it is hard for me to call somebody I don’t know, and Sue you are so good at that. I mean you can talk to a block of cement, and I mean that.

 **S ROBINSON-NEEB**: You’re right that is not a problem for me.

**R SMYTHE**: Yeah so—

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** I look around and I see things. I have no problem approaching somebody in person, in email, on the phone, whatever, and trying to tell them a little about OLLI and ask them if they want to teach whatever subject they have in mind. That is not a problem for me. I love being on the curriculum committee because we do get to survey lots of different options for classes. Some are just so fascinating and others are just—woah, way off the deep end and we don’t accept those. That’s ok, we are there to evaluate to put a program that is balanced, fun, interesting, and informative. I think it is a fun to do and be on the curriculum committee. I enjoy that.

**R SMYTHE:** I wanted to share another quote card, it is one of my favorites. I think this goes along with OLLI. It is by Brian Tracey who is a motivational speaker and he says—

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** Yes.

**R SMYTHE:** You will regret many things in life but you will never regret being too kind or being too fair.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** Boy, isn’t that the truth.

**R SMYTHE:** I love that.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** That is true.

**R SMYTHE:** And I found that so many times at OLLI, when you’re talking to people, they will have a problem or issue and you talk to them about it and give them some advice and they feel so much better that they talked to you.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** Yes, they do.

**R SMYTHE:** That would have never happened if they hadn’t been come to OLLI.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** You know another way I see and sense that some of our members are not contributing that they could and that is financially. Yes, we pay for classes, yes, we pay a registration fee but that does not cover all the overhead. I would like to see more people get involved financially. It does not have to be a lot, it can be $10 a month. It doesn’t have to be a big contribution but I think they are missing the boat when they don’t feel financially responsible or connected.

**R SMYTHE:** And I agree. We give twice a year, we are on the twice a year program.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** Yes

**R SMYTHE:** We don’t give a lot of money we give a little chunk of change, but it makes me feel good giving to the OLLI program.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** Exactly.

**R SMYTHE:** And it certainly is not putting me on the streets. I think that when you give to something you feel more a part of it.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** Absolutely. We have had a couple of people who have passed on and left OLLI in their will and that is greatly appreciated. Really that is a special gift to give to the program.

**R SMYTHE:** I feel a sense of belonging. The organization is so… Sue you’re right about that. I think that is important.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** I know one reason, well I think I know why some of our members aren’t more inclined to give to the OLLI program. It’s because they are college graduates and they have an attachment to where they went to school, and they like to give to their alma mater. I certainly understand that, but I would hope that they would include OLLI as one of their places where they are gaining some fun and interest and that they’d like to see the program go on.

**R SMYTHE:** I think that giving back is so important in life, it can be financial. Some people may not have the extra $10 they just give the time back.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** Absolutely.

**R SMYTHE:** giving up any way.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** Absolutely. Yes. You touched on a good thing too, it is not just about the money, it is about time. People can start by being an ambassador, that’s fine. You just show up half an hour early for class, get the attendance sheet and sit there and greet people as they come in, check their names off. It is a good way to be involved, learn names, and help out the program. It doesn’t take any effort at all.

**R SMYTHE:** Right. I agree it is like you said Sue, it’s so much fun.I think what many people have said on our surveys is that one of the things they like besides learning is the connections they make.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** Absolutely. That is a great way to make connections and meet people.
You’re right about that, it is a good way to combat loneliness and all kinds of things.

**R SMYTHE:** Right.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** And you know the other committees that we have people can volunteer for those too. We have lots of interesting things going on. We have special interest groups called ZIGS. People can sit and have a discussion of something that they like. It is a pretty well-rounded program all together.

**R SMYTHE:** The book club sounded like fun. Do they still to have a book club Sue?

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:**  They do. They have a book club, I think they have two maybe two. One was full and I think they were trying to start a second one. That is an easy way to entertain yourself, get involved in something, and think outside the box. Yeah, I think the book club is a great idea to join.

**R SMYTHE:** There are lots of opportunities to give back to the community and give back to OLLI. There is something for everybody. Some people just want to be students which is fine. I think one of the… how do I want to say this…people are consumed by fear. I always say fear is fictional evidence during real.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** Yes.

**R SMYTHE:** If you feel not qualified enough to be on the committee, there is nothing to fear.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** Yes. Yes.

**R SMYTHE:** For anybody that is listening to this, you could never meet a friendlier group of people than the OLLI students. Take the leap and volunteer. **S ROBINSON-NEEB:** When we are in full operation, we have fun day trips too.

**R SMYTHE:** Right.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** It’s fun to get on the bus with a bunch of people and go somewhere. Have a nice lunch, tour… those are fun activities too.

**R SMYTHE:** Oh absolutely.The trip to Laguna, it was the most beautiful day. We saw the art museum and then we went to that restaurant right above the hill.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** Yes. Yes.

(INAUDIBLE)

**R SMYTHE:**  It was so gorgeous.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** Yes.

**R SMYTHE:** It was one of the highlights of my year. Yeah, all those day trips but yeah, I just think there is so much opportunity for people to give and get involved.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** Get involved. Yeah. You know some of the people who are students, I bet they would be qualified to teach a class too if they would be brave enough to step forward.

**R SMYTHE:** Yeah.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB:** I bet they have some interesting background, or some interesting thing they have studied in their life and they would like to share their knowledge. I bet there are some teachers lurking out there.

**R SMYTHE:** Oh, yeah.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: That don’t speak forward.

**R SMYTHE**: Oh yeah. Absolutely.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: Yeah.

**R SMYTHE**: I-I taught two classes and I kind of went overboard because I’m an obsessive compulsive.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: Yes, you are.

**R SMYTHE**: Yes, I am.

(LAUGHTER)

**R SMYTHE**: It is fun but it is different. I did learn that teaching adults is much different than teaching teenagers.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: Oh yeah.

**R SMYTHE**: It is also a challenge. I am glad I did it. I mean I am glad I did it. Sue, of all the things you’ve done, what have you liked the most?

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: Oh, that is hard to evaluate. I certainly enjoy being a student. I loved some of the classes I have been in.

**R SMYTHE**: And I think, the fact that there is no test and no homework.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: Oh, isn’t that wonderful. (LAUGHS)

**R SMYTHE**: Wonderful. And people, when you tell them that, they think that it is just wonderful because it takes all that pressure off.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: Exactly.

**R SMYTHE**: It is still relaxing. It is such a win-win situation to take classes when you don’t have to be evaluated or getting a grade for. Then you meet all these new people who are learning the new material and the fee is so reasonable. It is just the best thing you can do for your life.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: Yeah, I am really missing it in this shut down.

**R SMYTHE**: Me too.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: My life has just come to a screeching halt. No more meetings, no more classes, no more fun on campus. So, I am one of those people really ready to come back to campus and get back to normal.

**R SMYTHE**: I say amen to that. Although I have to say I enjoyed to zoom better than I thought I would. I have resisted it but it has been a nice substitute. At least you feel like you are seeing people.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: I agree, it is a way to stay connected and to see people. I can’t bad mouth zoom but I certainly prefer in person.

**R SMYTHE**: We were talking about the irony of social distancing, it is what we’re supposed to be doing but in OLLI there is social closeness.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: Oh my god.

**R SMYTHE**: Yeah, I mean, so, that social closeness and social distancing. Another thing, it sounds maybe kind of crazy but I miss hugging. I am a hugger. I hug a lot of people at OLLI and I miss that hugging. OLLI, I miss those hugs. Not so much for me but I like giving the hugs to people because they like them.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: And we like getting them from you too.

**R SMYTHE**: Yeah.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: Yeah, but anyways, I think OLLI is a great asset to anybody’s life. I don’t know why they wouldn’t at least give it a shot.

**R SMYTHE**: Again, there’s so many people that don’t know about OLLI. I just shake my head and think what else can we do. We’ve tried everything under the sun, and then of course we have a very educated neighborhood. A lot of people went to college and they’re just not interested in going back to school.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: Yeah, I find that interesting. When people sometimes ask me, what do you do with your time. I tell them “I go to school and take these fun classes.” And they turn their n nose up go like, “Go to school?” and I say “Yes, it’s fun. It’s short term” Like you said no homework, no books, no tests. “Oh, I wouldn’t. I’ve had enough of school.” So, you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make them drink I guess. I don’t get it.

**R SMYTHE**: I don’t get it either. We did get finally, one of our friends, one of our neighbors across the street. He was a teacher for forty years. We got him on a couple of day trips and he liked it.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: I bet.

**R SMYTHE**: So, then we finally got another person in our neighborhood. They don’t know what they’re missing.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: Absolutely. Absolutely.

**R SMYTHE**: So, this is kind of think someone listening to this podcast. This is the kind of instructors we have. They make an impression on you.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: They do indeed. They’re experts in their field. And they make it interesting. Yeah.

**R SMYTHE**: If you have a question and you raise your hand, the instructor is always very good about answering your question. Instead of just answering the question, the first sentence out of their mouth will be “that was a great question” or “this is a good question” or “’I’m so glad you asked.” They make you feel welcomed about asking a question. Maybe its not the thing you got on your college days when they look at you like that is the stupidest question I have ever heard.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: Yeah that would be me probably.

(LAUGHTER)

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: asking stupid questions. (LAUGHS)

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: But that is alright. Stupid is ok.

**R SMYTHE**: No, you always ask good questions. You always ask question in class and that is good because they’re good questions.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: Thank you.

**R SMYTHE**: Nelson Mandela said that education was the only thing that can change the world. Whether you’re nine or ninety, education is still important. So, giving and donating money, and time makes me feel like maybe I will make the world a little bit better. By being on the earth I did something constructive.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

**R SMYTHE**: We will come back to you tenfold.

**S ROBINSON-NEEB**: I can only hope. Yes.

(LAUGHTER)

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC ENDED)

**A POLAND**: Sue Robinson-Neeb and Ray Smythe. Two volunteers at OLLI. As Sue and Ray just discussed, there are so many great reasons to become an OLLI member. Just as there are many ways to share your time and talents with the OLLI Program. For instance, you could serve on our member supported committees, teach a class or two, host a special interest group, or you could work as an ambassador who welcomes everyone to class. So, if you’re interested in membership community or even just learning please consider giving back to OLLI. You can go to our website to see where you might fit in and fill out an application. Tap in to your level of interest. Our website is csusb.edu/olli. That stands for California State University San Bernardino .edu / Osher Life Long Learning Institute. So, the website again is, csusb.edu/olli. Once there click on ‘about OLLI’ on the top and a drop-down menu will come out and click on ‘volunteer’ and let us know about know what you want to give back to OLLI. I’ll repeat that. You go to our website csusb.edu/olli. Once there click on ‘about OLLI’ and then ‘volunteer.’ Here are the voices of other members who are giving back to our beloved OLLI. And loving the return on their gifts.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

**OLLI MEMBER 1**: We’ve gone through tremendous growth the last couple of years. So, we’ve got a lot of new energy and excitement both in our classroom, and in our committee, and volunteers.

**OLLI MEMBER 2**: There are so many volunteer opportunities and it can be enriching adding to your experiences when you are taking classes. Which are wonderful.

**OLLI MEMBER 3:** I am involved in the Osher legacy program. I would just like to give back something from a life that has been a very good life.

**OLLI MEMBER 4:** You know I give money to the colleges I have been to because they have added to my life and I feel the same way about Osher. I spent more time here than I did in of my alma mater. So, it means a lot to me and I want to see the program continue to grow and succeed.

**OLLI MEMBER 5:** I have become a volunteer because I have felt such a welcomeness and really interest in my ideas and opinion.

**OLLI MEMBER 6**: People are here to enjoy, to engage, and to learn. And that is a lot better than people who want to spend some time.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC ENDS)

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**A POLAND**: This has been *In Conversation: The Voices of OLLI*. Our thanks to Cal State San Bernardino in Palm Desert. Along with the communications study professor, Lacey Kendall and her media students. This podcast was produced for OLLI by Lou Gorfain and I am Dr. Arlette Poland.

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