Long live life long learners

By Jennifer Smith

When Greg Murphy moved to Kelowna 25 years ago for a new job, he figured on a short stint in a new community.

Hired to fill the days of seniors who registered for classes at the Water Street Senior Centre in the city's downtown core, he quickly grew to love his work and says part of what makes it so interesting is the interested people with whom he spends his days.

Really, I've learned more from being around them and listening to their stories than they probably have from me, the activities programmer said with a chuckle.

Over the years he has seen the centre's clients thrive by spending time with friends and peers learning new skills. It is a form of preventative health care, he claims. And as the three senior centres he is responsible for now boast almost 3000 members among them, he believes more retirees than ever before are out to learn new things and stay as active.

"There's been a bit of a change in recent years," said Murphy, noting the staple activities on his schedule once included more card games than yoga. "The traditional programs are becoming less popular and the more educational are popular."

Whether those educational programs tend to the academic—like learning new Internet skills—or the recreational—such as the Tai Chi class he consistently books solid—Murphy says the centres are full of industrious people who took an approach to their twilight years popularly referred to as 'life long learning'.

It's a phenomenon Charlotte Kushner has noticed in the pre-retirement or baby boomers she deals with at Okanagan College as well.

As director of continuing studies for the college, Kushner says the students she sees are not only trying to learn new things in retirement but reshaping the meaning of this period altogether.

The average age of a continuing education student in the Okanagan hovers between 39 and 41 years old, with the seats in the college's general interest courses usually filled by crowds 50 years old or older. Returning to the college to pursue personal interests, many are also keen on trying out a new career path at a stage where their predecessors were more likely to aim for early retirement.

"We are finding more and more people are coming in in their forties and fifties, coming to take courses that provide them with some skills or training for a new career. For example, we have a course that we offer in Vernon and we're trying out in Salmon Arm right now called: Create the Work You Love," she said.

Geared toward early retirees and those in the latter phase of their current profession, the instructor gives students tools to explore other options for earning a living, from using a current skill set to do consulting to foraging new paths into a field which reflects a lifelong passion.

"They may have spent years and years and years of their life working in one job area, but now they can really start to take a look at doing something that they really love to do," explained Kushner.

By building on an existing interest rather than aiming to land the good benefits package or solid salary that so often characterize early career choices, these returning students extend their working lives while merging their personal and professional identity.

"I think that people, for the most part, are more active in their lives and in their careers," Kushner said. "People aren't settling into one career for 25 years like they used to. In our work world now you have to stay current and we really encourage people to come get a diploma, degree, whatever it is, but then to keep coming back to learn new things."

That philosophy is a critical component of the anti-aging research, UBC Okanagan professor on aging and health Dr. Mary Ann Murphy is engaged in.

"There's lots of new evidence on the importance of keeping the brain active," said Murphy, who studies elite athletes in their 70s and 80s.

Watching the body of research on aging grow, the professor says there is now plenty of evidence suggesting it's possible to recover lost memory and save memory function well into our twilight years by exercising our minds in new ways.

"We need to engage the brain in things it isn't used to doing—driving a new route to work or solving a puzzle in a way your brain isn't used to," she said.

Hand-held gadgets which keep the mind agile with numbers games are now marketed to anyone interested in building memory function, but the best example of keeping the mind off autopilot that Murphy has seen is the Society for Learning in Retirement.

Based in Kelowna, the society is a non-profit organization in which seniors teach other seniors new skills. Course subjects range from ethereal topics like South African flora and fauna to physical skills like Flamenco dancing, or more scholarly topics like current affairs and history.

Though their numbers once ebbed and flowed, today the society boasts a steady 600 members and 50 well-subscribed, if not oversubscribed, courses each year. And with no degree or critical grade at the end to motivate students, their efforts are testament to how well the life long learning concept has caught on in the Okanagan where Murphy says seniors are setting an example on how to age well.

"It's really seniors teaching seniors. And of course, there's so many people in the Okanagan—retired pro-

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fessors, retired engineers, retired executives—that it is not hard to find a supply of people who want to learn or want to teach," she said.

Murphy's research shows the Okanagan may, in fact, serve as a centre for longevity in Canada in coming years. Already, Kelowna has the most seniors over the age of 65 of any major city in the country and the entire region shares many of the properties of communities known around the world for the longevity of their citizens.

Experts in the aging field are exploring connections between New England; Nova Scotia; Loma Linda, California; the Mediterranean island of Sardinia, Okinawa, Japan and Costa Rica—those areas where people live the longest, she said.

On the surface, the fabric of each society appears quite different, with a variety of levels of affluence and education, each with different ethnicities and religions; but the similarities among communities are all elements common to the Okanagan, Murphy has noticed.

Each community, for example, sits close to a large body of fresh water and each has access to plenty of red wine through local vineyards.

And whether or not either element proves key to finding an optimum physical environment to fight the advances of age, the professor says research on aging already shows one of the most important ways to stay healthy as we grow older is find a balance of physical and creative activity and never stop learning.

Many Okanagan communities have caught on to the formula.

Members of the Society for Learning in Retirement are now acting as a consultant in areas like Penticton, sharing what they've learned about maintaining a well-balanced retirement life. And local colleges and the university continue to offer instruction that both targets baby boomers and seniors and inspires those within these demographics to pursue a particular passion through each school's regular programs.

Some options to keep in mind when looking for courses to try include:

-Computer skills for the 50+: Senior centres in most communities now offer computer courses, but Okanagan College is currently running computer classes from Oliver through Salmon Arm targeted specifically to those over 50 years old

-For anyone interested in pursuing a degree or diploma program, the University of British Columbia Okanagan offers free tuition to those over 65, while the college offers a reduced rate of $75 per semester, both subject to space availability

-Just like the life skills courses targeted at those starting out in life—things like basic accounting and sign language for mothers and babies—there are life skills courses targeted at seniors as well. Okanagan College, for example, now offers a course on grandparenting to help ease the switch from direct parenting to the grandparent role.

-There are still plenty of traditional courses for those looking to garden, play Duplicate Bridge or learn the accordion offered through senior centres throughout the Okanagan, however options like wine appreciation and new art techniques have become increasingly popular.