

**How It Began:  
The Peer Learning  
Partnership  
at  
Anne Arundel  
Community College**

by

Margaret Masson Brinsley



# Acknowledgments

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**Margaret Masson Brinsley  
Board Member  
Peer Learning Partnership  
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To help understand the role of the Peer Learning Partnership (PLP) at Anne Arundel Community College, consider the day of Friday, December 5, 2008. Beginning at 9:30 a.m., a group of older learners assembled in a multi-media classroom in the CALT Building on campus to present previews of courses they would be offering in the winter and spring terms of 2009. This was a rehearsal for the PLP Open House and Course Preview the following week. The twenty or so people in the room offered helpful critiques of each other's presentations, marveled at the skills of colleagues who had never stood before an adult audience before, and anticipated the intellectual energy, insight, and fun that lay ahead for those who would take and teach the proposed classes. Fourteen courses were presented, covering such areas as mythology, the evolution of computers, English and American history, literature, art, economics, sociology, nuclear power, Plato's thought, climate and man, and misleading statistics.



Peer Learning Partnership members in a class discussion, 2008

Noon came, but most of the group stayed on to hear the last presenters and to help shape the program for the Open House. Those who left went to the classroom next door where a large crowd of PLP members attended a Current Events Discussion (CED) in the Fridays with Friends series. The subject was conflict in the eastern Congo which had been on the front page of newspapers for the past month. Leading the discussion was Jim Don, a PLP member who had lived in the

Congo in the 1960s during another tumultuous period. His personal experiences had been deepened and updated through his preparation to teach a course for the PLP on the emergence of independent states in Africa. Jim had finished facilitating this course three weeks earlier. Those who had taken the course already felt they had a better understanding of the headlines. Questions and discussion came quickly from the crowd and the room was alive with ideas, opinions and laughter.

As the two-hour discussion period drew to a close, another current issue was raised: the terrorist acts in Mumbai, India, just eight days before. Another PLP member agreed to share his personal knowledge. Alex Alexander, who had grown up in India, provided an insightful thumbnail sketch of Indian partition in the 1940s, the continuing conflict between Hindus and Muslims, and the origins of the dispute over Kashmir. Chances were that one would leave this CED feeling stimulated by the discussion, enlightened as to the issues, and respectful of the

knowledge represented by the 150 or so members of the PLP. It was hard to imagine the tentative steps taken five years earlier that had led to this exciting moment.

### **Germination of an Idea**

When Margaret Masson Brinsley retired from her position as an academic administrator at Towson University in April 2000, she and her husband Jim looked around for lifelong learning opportunities in the Annapolis area. In her career as an academic administrator, Margaret (Maggie) had helped start the Auburn Society at Towson University, based on national models called Institutes for Learning in Retirement or Lifelong Learning Institutes (LLIs). She would use this experience, plus input from other LLIs in Maryland and neighboring states, to launch something similar in Anne Arundel County.

Despite their rather formal-sounding name, LLIs come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. They are usually sponsored by colleges or universities that see a positive benefit in having older learners on campus alongside traditional age students. Lifelong Learning Institutes are therefore directed towards people who are retired, and who are drawn towards formal and informal educational opportunities to feed their intellectual appetite. LLIs can be described as self-directed learning communities in that they require membership and that members run the organization, usually through committees. This generates camaraderie among like-minded, intellectually curious learners. Participation is a key concept, not only in running the LLI, but in creating opportunities for teaching and learning. Most LLIs offer courses that are designed by and for the members who are both students and instructors. Ideally, all participation is voluntary and unpaid.

Looking through the Anne Arundel Community College *Schedule of Noncredit Courses*, the Brinsleys found and joined the Guild for LIFE (Learning is for Everyone). The Guild organizes monthly trips for older learners during the fall and spring semesters. Each trip is prefaced by an introductory lecture on the trip destination. Early in 2001 Maggie Brinsley became editor of the Guild's monthly newsletter, called LIFE LINES, and a member of the board. She had discussed the LLI concept with Sheila Bohun, Director of Lifelong Learning at AACC, which sponsored the Guild for LIFE. Maggie raised the topic again with Bohun's successor, Louann Tracy. The Guild board took up a suggestion to survey the members about their program, including a question about adding a third monthly meeting for discussion or interest groups. Results of this survey showed some enthusiasm for expanding the Guild program to include learning sessions but more sentiment for keeping the status quo. The LLI initiative would go forward independently from the Guild for LIFE but with support from and participation by some of the Guild's members.

In March 2003 nine people drawn from the Guild and AACC staff visited the Academy of Lifelong Learning at the Wilmington campus of the University of Delaware. It was an eye-opening experience. From modest beginnings in 1980, the Academy had grown to 2000 members in 2003, aged 50 or older, and had its own building, erected through a generous private donation and other public and private contributions. The Maryland group came back excited by the potential of the lifelong learning movement.

## Formation of the Steering Committee

We had learned that an LLI could represent whatever the members wanted. A plan was developed to implement a self-directed learning community at Anne Arundel Community College. The plan called for information gathering and publicity phases. Then a public meeting would be held for interested individuals who would form a steering committee. That committee would devise a fee structure, pick a name, and organize a pilot session to demonstrate the skills that members could bring to teaching and learning. A more complete set of courses would follow in the fall of 2004. Meanwhile, the steering committee would work towards a formal organizational structure. Maggie Brinsley was hired by AACC to work on the initiative from July through October of 2003 and April 2004 through June 2005.

On September 23 2003 between 40 and 50 people attended an open house where they heard presentations by leaders of LLIs at the College of Notre Dame in Baltimore, Hagerstown Community College, Washington College in Chestertown, MD., and the Academy at the University of Delaware. Forty-one people had returned an interest survey, with 26 saying they were ready to help. A list of 85 suggested course topics had been generated. Of considerable importance, as it turned out, was publicity on our behalf through the website of the Phoenix Society, the retiree organization of the National Security Administration (NSA) which reached over 3000 individuals.

Therese Breza, Jim and Margaret Brinsley, Cynthia Chess, Jim and Pam Hearn, Diane Lyons, Susanne Sullivan, and Tom Totushek attended the meeting in September 2003 and have been active PLP members to this day. The list of charter members, defined as those who joined before December 31 2004, was as follows: Joan Alspaw, Therese Breza, the Brinsleys, Clint Brooks, Vic Brown, Heidi Casasco, Patsy Davis, Jim Don, Midge and Skip Eastman, Marilyn Fisher, Brigitta Hane, Dorcas Hayes, the Hearn, Terry and Marge Lantz, Fran Levin, Eileen Lewis, Diane Lyons, Barbara and Bob McCamish, Al Tober, and Tom Totushek.

The steering committee held its first two meetings on September 30 and October 7 2003. As a result of these meetings, the committee adopted the following mission statement: "This community of peers will develop opportunities for intellectual development, cultural stimulation, personal growth, and social interaction in an academic cooperative, run by its members who volunteer their time and talents." With slight rewording in July 2006, this mission statement has guided the PLP since its beginning. The steering committee reviewed options for membership and fees and agreed to the principle that instructors should be members who volunteer their skills and time. Maggie Brinsley passed along suggestions about future committee tasks and contacts to be made. Ed Zdankiewicz agreed to convene and chair the steering committee, a task that would rotate from time to time. Others taking on responsibilities were Joan Alspaw, Pam Hearn, Leah Skinner, and Midge Eastman.

Meetings of the steering committee in November and December 2003 discussed the type of organization envisaged for the future. That vision was captured in the name Peer Learning Partnership which was adopted before the end of the year. The term "facilitator," to represent the instructional leader, was also agreed upon in order to convey the idea that complete expertise was not required to become a PLP teacher.

By January 2004 the steering committee consisted of Joan Alspaw, Clint Brooks, Jim Hearn, Pam Hearn, Terry Lantz, Tom Totushek, Bill Wohfeld, and Ed Zdankiewicz. Lynne Brosan, Jeanne Gault, and Al Tober were also participating. Fran Levin and Paul Schatzberg joined the committee the next month. Research and discussions with other LLIs led the steering committee initially to establish an annual membership fee of \$100 plus \$25 per class, with the goal of being self supporting.



Members of the steering committee, February 2004. (L to R) Clint Brooks, Pam Hearn, Jim Hearn, Ed Zdankiewicz, Terry Lantz, Maggie Brinsley, Tom Totushek, Fran Levin, and Al Tober

Various fee alternatives were tried during 2004. Course proposals for a pilot session in May 2004 were requested from the membership. Early in 2004 a statement defining the relationship between the PLP and AACC and their joint aspirations was prepared to help recruit members and find facilitators. Clint Brooks wrote a definition of the term facilitator and described the type of peer learning that was anticipated. In his words, “it can mean to aid, explain, enable, help, foster, organize, lead or teach. Which meaning it takes on will be a function of the context of how a given ‘course’ is being conducted.... The intent of the PLP is to be participatory, flexible, and adaptive.”

Discussions in the steering committee focused on an Open House in April and courses for the pilot session. Almost all members of the committee seemed to have travel plans between March and June and several expressed concern about our ability to implement the program for spring 2004. But the committee went ahead with plans for the pilot courses and the group rallied.

### **A Successful Pilot Session – May 2004**

The PLP began with four pilot courses offered once a week for three weeks in early May 2004: Margaret Brinsley offered *In Search of the Sacred Feminine in History*; Fran Levin facilitated *Avenues of Creative Expression*; Clint Brooks led *Perspective on Our Universe*; and Vic Brown offered *Spiritual Investment*. An Open House was held in April to introduce the

courses and the PLP. The list of charter members grew from 13 to 22 by the beginning of May 2004 and to 24 by the end of the year.



Clint Brooks facilitating Perspective on Our Universe in the Pilot Session, May 2004, in the Johnson Building at AACC



Vic Brown leading a discussion in the Pilot Session with Heidi Casasco and Tom Totushek, May 2004



Joan Alspaw and Maggie Brinsley at the Post-Pilot Celebration Lunch, June 2004

Now the leaders and members of the PLP could celebrate. A Post-Pilot Lunch was held on June 2 2004. It included brain storming groups in which everyone contributed ideas for the fall curriculum. It was the first opportunity for social interaction and celebration of our accomplishments.



Post-Pilot Celebration Lunch, June 2004.

### **Fall 2004 – The First Full Curriculum**

The steering committee now addressed organizational issues. At its meeting on June 9 2004 it set up a curriculum committee with defined responsibilities and a procedure for requesting course proposals. Margaret Brinsley served at first as liaison between the curriculum and steering committees; Dorcas Hayes later took over as chairperson. Joan Alspaw agreed to lead the public relations committee. The social committee had two members - Pam Hearn and Eileen Lewis. The steering committee now had eight members: Joan Alspaw, Maggie Brinsley, Clint Brooks, Pam Hearn, Terry Lantz, Fran Levin, Al Tober and Tom Totushek. An ad hoc committee, chaired by Tom Totushek, was charged with drafting by-laws to eventually replace the steering committee with an elected board of directors.

An impressive curriculum was proposed for fall 2004. Seven courses, all facilitated by members of the PLP who volunteered their time and expertise, covered the gamut from astronomy, philosophy, history and film to the internet and digital photography. Most were six weeks long, although there were other formats as well. Despite the fact that a couple of courses had to be cancelled or postponed, that fall semester clearly revealed the potential of the PLP as a lifelong learning opportunity. When the Brinsleys hosted a potluck picnic in early September, it was evident that there was good company to be found in the PLP as well. In November another feature of the PLP program was inaugurated through a brown bag lunch meeting to discuss current events, led by Pam Hearn. This would evolve into Fridays with Friends.



PLP Open House and Course Preview, fall 2004

Twenty-four people attended a celebration lunch on December 8 2004 at the college. Feedback solicited from attendees was most encouraging. Asked what they found worthwhile about the PLP they said:

- The opportunity to continue learning in a non-threatening atmosphere
- Exposure to other thinking people
- New friends – new ideas
- Broadening horizons and perspectives
- Open learning, interesting people
- Opportunity to openly discuss issues and voice opinions
- Ability to share knowledge and viewpoints
- Provides opportunities
- Great learning experience from facilitators who are truly engaged and enthusiastic about their subject

This was exactly what the group of PLP leaders had hoped the organization would achieve. Now the question was how to let others know about its existence and what it offered.

Charter membership, defined as those who joined before the end of 2004, stood at 24 by December 31. Four additional members were added in January 2005. But the size of the PLP was worrisome. Could this small cohort support the exciting programs being proposed? How could the concept of a self-directed learning community be explained to others? Could the Peer Learning Partnership survive?

### **Fall 2004 – a Critical Juncture**

The November 2004 meeting of the steering committee was perhaps the most important since the first open meeting in September 2003. Jim Don had joined the committee and taken on responsibility as treasurer. He presented a report laying out various fee options and their long-

term implications. The original choice of a \$100 annual membership, plus course fees, had not worked well, as demonstrated by the difficulty in recruiting new members to the PLP. The steering committee therefore adopted a fresh approach, keeping fees as low as possible and depending on increasing membership to attain the financial goals. The committee voted to charge \$25 for a six-month membership, plus \$25 for each course. This change was a significant factor in boosting membership in 2005. In spring 2006 an additional dollar for tuition brought charges to \$26 for membership and for each course. Even so, the income would not begin to cover all of the facilities and services that the college made available, such as classroom space, audio-visual equipment, meeting rooms and assistance from college staff.

If the PLP could not be self supporting, another option considered was for AACC to be eligible for funding from the State of Maryland for enrollment in PLP courses. Because of their high quality, it was thought that many PLP courses would meet the requirements for eligibility. But these courses would have to be run so as to comply with State regulations - such as student attendance and classroom contact hours. Facilitators would need to keep attendance records and be accountable in other ways. PLP courses would be treated like other noncredit classes on campus, and would be listed in the AACC *Schedule of Noncredit Courses*. The college would produce a brochure and other publicity for the program. Members of the steering committee endorsed this approach in the November 2004 meeting.

This was a point of departure for the PLP. Like many fledgling organizations, ours had improvised. Contacts with the media and press releases, for example, had originated solely from the PLP and had no doubt lacked clout. Charges for membership and course fees had changed several times in 2004, with confusing results. As PLP courses were listed in college publications and added to State-funded inventories, requests for classroom space and campus resources became more routine. Perhaps the PLP lost some flexibility in this process, but it gained immensely in credibility and recognition through its closer association with AACC.

In keeping with the fresh emphasis on recruiting new members for the PLP, the public relations committee was renamed marketing and outreach. Each member was asked to make a list of 10 to 15 acquaintances to inform about the PLP and invite to the next open house. Jim Don now chaired the marketing and outreach committee with a focus on recruiting new members and retaining current ones. Word of mouth would become the most powerful tool for recruitment and members were to be recognized for their outreach efforts.

### **2005 – PLP finds its Place**

New recruitment efforts and more attractive membership charges for PLP brought immediate results. By June 2005 the PLP had 52 members, 25 of whom had joined in the spring. Membership reached 67 in the second half of the year. In fall 2006 it reached over 100 and continued to grow.



Louann Tracy addressing the PLP Open House in January 2005

As the PLP entered 2005 its place on the AACC campus was becoming established. The program had cubicle space, and a computer and telephone on campus in the Johnson Building. Spring classes were held in the brand new Center for Applied Learning and Technology or CALT building in classrooms with state-of-the-art audio-visual equipment. The pleasant atrium with its handy cafeteria would serve as a place for PLP members to eat lunch and socialize between classes.

Fridays with Friends also began meeting in the CALT building. It evolved from the brown bag lunches dedicated to discussion of current events on the first Friday of the month. Early in 2005 Al Tober initiated a computer users' group on the second Friday. A book group, first led by Kathleen Daney, met on the third Friday, and travel enthusiasts, convened by Hal Boyd, began meeting every fourth Friday. In months when there was a fifth Friday, film buffs, led by Ada Stankard, got together to discuss a film and sometimes to watch it together.

Fridays with Friends has continued to evolve. The second Friday has morphed into a Science and Technology group with Randy Pack as its mentor. Other individuals have assumed leadership of Friday groups as the need arose. For members who chose not to sign up for courses, it was a way to remain involved and enjoy a stimulating interaction at the end of the week. It is safe to say that the popularity of Fridays with Friends has taken us all by surprise.



Participants in a Friday with Friends Discussion, January 2009

### The Curriculum Committee Gains Importance

Early in 2005 the curriculum committee developed a system for soliciting course proposals, meeting with would-be facilitators to discuss their proposals, and sometimes recommending changes to strengthen them. Descriptions of potential courses selected by the committee were sent to the membership of PLP in a straw poll to determine interest in the proposed offerings. The committee used the straw poll, together with other considerations, to build a viable curriculum for each semester. This task required a planning timeline of up to one

year in advance of when courses would be offered in order for PLP information to be published in the *AACC Schedule of Noncredit Courses*. Bill Daney succeeded Dorcas Hayes as curriculum committee chair in 2005, and Steve Cohen took over from Daney in the fall of 2007. Each one made an outstanding contribution to the task of developing an array of attractive, varied and popular courses that drew on the expertise and passion of members.



Jim Don and Maggie Brinsley on their way from a steering committee meeting

Reflecting membership growth in the PLP, a larger and larger number of courses had to be made available. Six courses were offered in spring 2005 and six more in the fall. Seven courses were offered in both the spring and fall of 2006. Ten courses, spread over three months, were developed for spring 2007, and eight in the fall of that year. In 2008, as the college formally divided winter and spring terms, the PLP offered six courses in the winter and seven courses in the spring term, as well as ten in the fall of 2008. Seven courses are planned for both winter and spring 2009 and 11 for fall 2009.

Course topics have been amazingly varied, as the following table shows. No fewer than 31 individuals have acted as facilitators to date.

<b>PLP Courses and Facilitators , 2004 to 2009.</b>			
<i>Repeated courses are shown in italics.</i>			
<b>Pilot Session, May 2004</b>	<b>Facilitator</b>	<b>Fall 2004</b>	<b>Facilitator</b>
In Search of the Sacred Feminine in History Avenues of Creative Expression Perspective on Our Universe Spiritual Investment	Maggie Brinsley Fran Levin Clint Brooks Vic Brown	African Independence Digital Camera Workshop Immigration in American History Perspective on Our Universe Philosophy in Society	Jim Don Jim Brinsley  Maggie Brinsley Clint Brooks Fran Levin
<b>Spring 2005</b>		<b>Fall 2005</b>	
China's most Powerful Family of the 20 <sup>th</sup> century Internet and Society PLP Seminar South Africa: An Emerging Superpower The Earth Charter Women in American Politics	Terry Lantz Jim Hearn/Al Tober Bill Lewis Jim Don  Bill & Nancy Rickard Maggie Brinsley	Antarctic Explorers Music Appreciation: Piano Past Civilizations and their Legacies <i>Perspectives on our Universe</i> The Chesapeake Bay: Can it be Saved? PLP Seminar	Jim Don Ted Brown  Maggie Brinsley Clint Brooks Jim Hearn/Al Tober Bill Lewis
<b>Spring 2006</b>		<b>Fall 2006</b>	
1776 – Context for Revolution Backyard Birds and Butterflies History of Science Emergence of Ancient Israelites Evolution of Modern Middle East PLP Seminar Living with Leonardo DaVinci	Maggie Brinsley Joan Alspaw Jim Brinsley Paul Schatzberg  Bryan Baas Bill Lewis Ted Brown	Seminar on Our Universe <i>South Africa: Emerging Superpower?</i> Art History: Impressionism Great Books – 1 <i>Immigration in American History</i> Six Easy Pieces Politics of Saving the Bay	Clint Brooks  Jim Don  Ted Brown Maggie Brinsley Jim Brinsley Jim Hearn/Al Tober
<b>Spring 2007</b>		<b>Fall 2007</b>	
Ancient Israel: Period of the Monarchies <i>Evolution of the Modern Middle East</i> Bach to Bartok – 1 England under the Tudors Great Books – 2 Macroeconomics: An Overview NASA Earth and Space Science Planet Earth Dynamics Romanovs: Lives of the Russian Czars PLP Seminar	Paul Schatzberg  Bryan Bass Ted Brown Maggie Brinsley Paul Schatzberg John Minion Bill Daney Steve Cohen  JoAnn Rich Bill Lewis	<i>Romanovs: Lives of the Russian Czars</i> PLP Seminar: US Presidents Challenge of Globalization Politics of Saving the Bay Evolution of the Mind Great Books -3 Bach to Bartok – 2 <i>1776 –Context for Revolution</i>	JoAnn Rich  Bill Lewis Hal Boyd/Bill Daney Jim Hearn/Al Tober Paul Schatzberg Paul Schatzberg Ted Brown Maggie Brinsley

<b>Winter/Spring 2008</b>		<b>Fall 2008</b>	
Great Books – Series 1 Gender Stereotypes in American Films <i>Emergence of Ancient Israel</i> Wine Appreciation for All Bach to Bartok -3 Calligraphy 1 Challenge of Globalization 2 Great Books – Series 2 Lives and Works of 5 Authors <i>Planet Earth Dynamics</i> <i>NASA Earth and Space Science</i> PLP Seminar Calligraphy 2	Paul Schatzberg  Maggie Brinsley Paul Schatzberg Loyd Luna Ted Brown Sally Hanan Hal Boyd/Bill Daney Paul Schatzberg JoAnn Rich Steve Cohen Bill Daney John Minion Sally Hanan	Investing on Line for Beginners Mind and Brain: Attaining Emotional Well-Being Witchcraft in Salem In the Beginning – World Creation Myths Women in Power: Lives of 5 Queens <i>Six Easy Pieces</i> Great Books – Series 2 cont. <i>Africa Emergent – Path to Independence</i> Bach to Bartok – 4 <i>PLP Seminar: US Presidents</i>	Fred Lebert  Paul Schatzberg Maggie Brinsley  Clint Logan  JoAnn Rich Jim Brinsley Paul Schatzberg  Jim Don Ted Brown Bill Lewis
<b>Winter 2009</b>		<b>Spring 2009</b>	
Anglo-Saxon Mythology 1 Great Books –Series 2, part 2 Evolution of Computers and Computing <i>England under the Tudors</i> Nuclear Power Principles and Issues <i>Evolution of the Yankee Dollar</i> Art Exploration	Clint Logan Paul Schatzberg  Jim Brinsley Maggie Brinsley  Dennis Grimes John Minion Lucinda Edinberg	Anglo-Saxon Mythology 2 Climate and Man American Revolution: Social and Military History Introduction to Plato’s Thought PLP Seminar: American Culture <i>Lives and Works of Five Authors</i> Statistics in the Real World	Clint Logan Steve Cohen/Bill Daney Carolyn May Paul Schatzberg Jon Darling JoAnn Rich Linda Loughrey

To encourage potential facilitators and provide them with skills and techniques for teaching adults, Louann Tracy offered sessions based on her train the trainer program. A second session, on using Power Point in the classroom, led by Al Tober, was added later. Experienced facilitators were always ready to mentor and provide advice. Thus, facilitators learned new technology and how to overcome technology glitches, reminding us all to be prepared for any eventuality.

Even with these resources on hand to help would-be facilitators, the fact that the PLP has found so many talented teachers within its own ranks is truly amazing. Some may not have known that they had a natural facility as presenters until they tried. Others may have been successful instructors but as an incidental part of their careers. Some, we think, have blossomed in the environment offered by the PLP. But don’t take my word for it. Listen to comments of learners saying what they liked about their recent courses:

- For me, this is the perfect PLP course. Lots of information distilled but not over-simplified and with ample time for discussion and Q & A.
- I liked the opportunity to discuss ambitious topics with people who are thoughtful, interesting and enjoy discussion.
- I listened to some great music with greater appreciation and enjoyed some of the anecdotes and humor about composers.

- I found this a very interesting course about the courage and curiosity of explorers in an unfriendly atmosphere. The instructor's presentation held my attention completely.
- I enjoyed the subject-video-class discussions. Participants shared their own knowledge with the class [which] increased my interest and understanding.
- Enthusiastic teacher- many slides, use of media, willing to answer many questions. Goes out of his way to help people understand. Wonderful course.
- Wonderful historical overview. Exceptionally good handouts. The facilitator certainly put an incredible amount of time and effort into preparing for this course.
- I liked the NASA videos! Also, I was interested in learning about the various projects underway at NASA
- Fascinating content. [I] appreciated the effort and research and organization that went into preparation and how up to date the content is. Enjoyed facilitator's style, knowledge and humor.

In February 2005 the PLP formally became a member of the Elderhostel Institute Network (EIN), a loose affiliation of nationwide LLIs. Membership in the EIN is free and participating institutes receive an electronic monthly newsletter. Members may attend a biennial regional conference and use the network to poll other LLIs on topics of general concern.



Some members of the steering committee who were recognized in the Open House, Sept. 2005

As standing committees took on some of the routine tasks of running the PLP, the steering committee focused on preparing a transition to an elected board. A general membership meeting was planned for September 23 2005 as part of the Open House. If the by-laws were approved, a slate of elected officers, together with chairs of the standing committees, would become the new board of directors. The steering committee met for the last time on September 6. In its final months Joan Alspaw, Margaret Brinsley, Clint Brooks, Jim Don, Dorcas Hayes, Pam Hearn, Terry Lantz, Fran Levin, Al Tober, and Tom Totushek participated in its work. They were recognized on September 23 for their dedicated commitment, vision and leadership.

## The First Elected Board

The new board of directors met in October 2005. It consisted of Margaret Brinsley as president, Bryan Baas as vice president, Jim Don as treasurer and chair of the marketing and outreach committee, Paul Schatzberg as secretary, and Pam Hearn and Kathleen Daney as members at large. Other board members were Dorcas Hayes, chairing the curriculum committee, and Eileen Lewis, chair of the social committee. Maggie Brinsley's contract with AACC to help start the Peer Learning Partnership had ended in June 2005 so she now served as a volunteer, as did all the other board members. The relationship between the PLP and AACC continued as articulated early in 2004.

In the November 2005 board meeting, it was suggested that a newsletter be prepared and mailed to all PLP members (now numbering 67), and any prospective members. The first four issues in December 2005 and in 2006 and spring 2007 were the work of Bill Lewis, Carolyn May, and Kathleen Daney, assisted by Maggie Brinsley, who became editor in November 2007. Contributions included previews of PLP courses, upcoming topics for Fridays with Friends, and accounts of overnight trips organized by the travel group, or class trips. Recent issues have featured creative writing by PLP members and profiles of facilitators prepared by Angela Smookler. All in all, the newsletter, now called *PeerView*, reflects the expanding scope of the PLP and the range of talent within its membership.



PLP trip to Norfolk and Virginia Beach, November 2006

Since it started in 2005, the Fridays with Friends travel group has organized several overnight trips. The first to western Maryland culminated in a tour of Frank Lloyd Wright's "Fallingwater," on a beautiful Pennsylvania fall day. Spring 2006 would find a group of PLP members in the Hudson Valley of New York touring various attractions. Ten travelers spent several nights in Virginia Beach and explored the Newport News-Norfolk area in November of 2006. Summer 2008 brought a day trip to the Brandywine Valley. Later in the year, PLP groups visited the Holocaust Museum and Marjorie Meriweather Post's home at Hillwood in Washington DC.

Class trips have included Ellis Island, an adjunct to Maggie Brinsley's

course on Immigration in American History in 2004. Sideling Hill in western Maryland was the destination for those who took Steve Cohen's Planet Earth Dynamics course. Wine aficionados, who participated in Loyd Luna's course in fall 2007, took in a wine tasting at Berrywine Plantations/Linganore Wine cellars. How apt was that?



Party time for Kathleen Daney, Paul Schatzberg, and Eileen Lewis

Successful social events have become a hallmark of the PLP. A winter lunch held at the home of Kathleen and Bill Daney in December 2005 was the first of many hosted by this generous couple. The Hearn's offered their home for another winter party. Outstanding summer parties were organized by Eileen and Bill Lewis at their home or community beach. As chair of the social committee, Eileen Lewis coordinated her energetic group to produce fabulous events and to enjoy doing so. The committee, renamed hospitality and outreach, triumphed with a pasta party in spring 2008, and a lasagna dinner in the fall. Branching out to other locales, PLP members took tea at Reynolds Tavern.



Fashion mavens Bill Lewis and John Doxey enjoying English high tea at Reynolds Tavern



Eileen Lewis receives congratulations from Hal Boyd

As Donna Porricelli took over the committee from Eileen Lewis, she and her group began to plan for additional social activities, such as theater and concert trips, and an evening of baseball. The committee is aiming at almost one event a month in 2009.

## **The Long Range Plan**

A major initiative in 2007 was the report of an ad hoc long range planning committee (LRPC), chaired by Jim Don. Its charge from the board was “to develop a vision for the future direction of the PLP over the next two-three years, identifying the PLP’s optimum size and the resources that would be required.” Committee members were Maggie Brinsley, Steve Cohen, Bill Daney, Pam Hearn, Eileen Lewis, Ada Stankard, and Al Tober. Louann Tracy met with the group as its work proceeded.

The committee reviewed the current strengths and weaknesses of the PLP, and considered what niche it should occupy among senior programs in Anne Arundel County. We compiled information about other Lifelong Learning Institutes (LLIs), close-by and in other states, including those funded by the Osher Foundation, a source of financial support for mature LLIs that also meet other criteria. Two models of growth were analyzed: one reaching 150 members by 2010; another having 300 members by that time.

In its report in May 2007 the committee recommended the slower growth model for several reasons. It would allow the PLP to continue to rely on volunteers and retain the intimacy of a small organization. The committee posited that 150 members could be accommodated in 12 courses each semester – in fall and winter/spring. These courses could be offered sequentially rather than simultaneously, thus requiring only one dedicated classroom, a fact that gained importance while the largest campus classroom building was being renovated. Another reason for gradual rather than rapid expansion was the challenge of finding facilitators within the PLP. The LRPC devoted considerable time to this topic and recommended various incentives for would-be instructors.

Membership retention was to be emphasized, with the social committee being charged with new responsibilities for hospitality and outreach, as reflected in its changed name. Members were to be polled from time to time to gauge the level of interest in clubs which the PLP might support. Fridays with Friends could continue as it was but would need larger meeting rooms if it grew in numbers. The LRPC projected that PLP membership would reach 150 by January 1, 2010, if not before. Then another ad hoc committee should study the next stage of growth. That might call for a different organizational structure, additional AACC resources, and perhaps part-time employed staff. The final report of the LRPC, endorsed by Louann Tracy of AACC, was adopted by the board in June, 2007.

The benchmark of 150 members will most likely be reached sooner than anticipated. In fall 2008 membership stood at 146. While gains in the winter/spring semester are small, membership usually increases by 10-20 percent in the fall. The Peer Learning Partnership will conduct another self examination before the end of 2009 – its fifth year of existence. In January 2009 the board asked Jim Don to convene a new long range planning committee.

## A New Cohort of Leaders

With the fall of 2007 a new cohort was seated on the board. Maggie Brinsley was succeeded as president by Bill Daney, and Ada Stankard took over as secretary from Paul Schatzberg. Al Tober also stepped down. JoAnn Rich and Vee Holt became members at large, with Vee assuming a role as coordinator of Fridays with Friends.



Board members, March 2008 (L to R) Steve Cohen, JoAnn Rich, Bryan Baas Vee Holt, Bill Daney (standing), Eileen Lewis, Ada Stankard, and Jim Don

In 2008, following a change in the by-laws, Fridays with Friends became a standing committee with Vee Holt as chair. Randy Pack joined the board as an at large member and Maggie Brinsley assumed another at large position. Angela Smookler was elected vice president and Donna Porricelli succeeded Eileen Lewis as chair of the hospitality and outreach committee. There are some new faces but there is the same level of commitment and enthusiasm as in the “founding generation.”



Board members, March 2009 (L to R front row) Vee Holt, JoAnn Rich, Maggie Brinsley, Donna Porricelli, Ada Stankard, (L to R back row) Bill Daney, Randy Pack, Angela Smookler, Steve Cohen, and Jim Don

## In Retrospect

Looking back over the last six years, one can see how closely the PLP today adheres to its original mission statement. Modified slightly in July, 2006 it now reads: “The Peer Learning Partnership is a community of peers organized to develop opportunities for intellectual development, cultural appreciation, personal growth and social interaction in an academic setting. The members manage the program and volunteer their time, skills and talents to gain and share knowledge on academic subjects.”

Perhaps more emphasis was placed on innovative formats to achieve these goals in the beginning. We hoped to encourage dialog in the classroom rather than depending on the one-way exchange of a typical lecture course. We knew that seniors bring a breadth of experience and knowledge - drawn from careers, or travel, or a lifetime of reading - to draw upon in the classroom. It is probably true to say that many courses offered currently tend to fall back on the lecture model, both because the facilitator has information that only he or she can impart, and because learners tend to like that format. It is also true that other features of the PLP program, which have developed over the first five years, provide ample opportunity for intellectual exchange: for example, Fridays with Friends discussions, and the Great Books course, both of which have a loyal following among PLP members. There is also the PLP seminar, which has experimented with several alternatives for unconventional learning.



Vee Holt, Jim Schaefer and Donna Porricelli debate a point in Great Books

Another observation from hindsight concerns the nature of the partnership between the PLP and Anne Arundel Community College. The very concept of Lifelong Learning Institutes (LLIs) is that they are sponsored by colleges and universities and that there is a mutual benefit in having older learners on campus. It is obvious that the PLP relies upon the active support of the college. The need for classrooms, meeting rooms, and audio-visual resources is apparent. Campus services, such as course registration, billing and accounting, have also been provided to the PLP by the college. (In other LLIs members have often supplied these services, devoting much time and energy to these routine functions.) Being able to depend on large college operations for printing, copying, and mailing has been very advantageous. PLP revenue is used

to purchase supplies and instructional materials, and to offset marketing, printing, facility costs, and other college support.



PLP learners in JoAnn Rich's class on the Romanovs

On the other side of our partnership with AACC, the PLP gives the college a further way to provide educational services to the community. Louann Tracy pointed out in 2004 that Anne Arundel County had a population of over 95,000 people aged 50 or older. While AACC had many programs for seniors, including courses offered at county senior centers, only 5,000 older adults were taking those courses. The county's demographic profile has shifted even more towards the later years

as zoning and requirements of the Smart Growth initiative have encouraged the building of retirement communities rather than schools. At the national level, the peak years for the retirement of baby boomers are still ahead. No doubt the college will try to extend its educational resources to this population, as indicated by the recent establishment of the Center on Aging at AACC. The Center on Aging brings together many of the college's programs and classes geared towards midlife and older adults. The PLP became part of the Center on Aging in February 2009.

Consider the value of PLP activity in volunteer hours to the community and the college. Start with the number of actual hours of instruction (classroom contact hours in academic jargon) provided by PLP facilitators in the last five years. That number comes to an amazing 884 hours.

Even more remarkable is the amount of time that goes into preparing for a typical six-week course that meets for two hours a week. When I surveyed some facilitators on this subject, I found that 15 to 20 hours preparation is typical for every one hour of classroom time. Adding the managerial functions, such as board meetings, committee meetings, or producing the PLP newsletter, and the number of volunteer hours grows exponentially.

Despite the heavy commitment of time and effort on the part of facilitators, there is unanimous agreement that the experience is personally rewarding.

- Steve Cohen drew from his experience to say "... most of our facilitators have found that developing and presenting a PLP course is exciting, rewarding, and yes, demanding. Personally, I have found it to be one of the most exhilarating things I have done."
- Paul Schatzberg wrote that he is grateful to the PLP, for "without the challenge of facilitating a course for the PLP, I would not pursue the in-depth study of an interesting topic. Therefore, whatever benefit I may be able to transmit to interested course

participants is balanced by the excitement and fulfillment of teaching cutting-edge subjects.”

- From JoAnn Rich we learn that "while reading a variety of books in preparation for my course, I pick up so much new information that I can hardly wait for the beginning of the class in order to discuss it with my fellow members."
- Al Tober wrote that “preparing for teaching a PLP course was an opportunity and motivation to delve deeper into an area that I had been interested in but had not pursued with any rigor. I found the class participants very interested, engaging and informative.”
- From Jim Hearn: “The experience of being a facilitator brings with it a basketful of enrichment. At a minimum, preparing the material deepens one's understanding of a topic. Even if a facilitator is an expert on a particular topic, the responsibility to present a course to class members, who bring to the occasion such diversity in learning and in life's experiences, is significant. If the multidisciplinary approach to learning and solving problems in today's world is the new wave, the PLP offers an experience at the crest of the wave.” Jim goes on, “A facilitator, no matter how talented, who spends six or more [weeks] with PLP members, is equally enriched by the questions, comments and occasional challenges that come from the members. If there is a more satisfying experience to being a PLP member, it must be that of being a PLP facilitator.”



The Hospitality & Outreach Committee Prepares Spaghetti Dinner for Sixty

Another remarkable fact about the PLP is that most committee members and helpers of all kinds say that they really enjoy contributing to this organization. Perhaps this is the nature of a learning community, as envisioned at the beginning. An imperative in those early days was: “Share your passions! Experience the joy of learning with your peers.” Or, from a more recent course evaluation form: “The PLP is a wonderful resource for the community, taking advantage of the accumulated knowledge of retired persons,” or, put more simply, “I love the PLP.”