
Margaret Masson Brinsley

A propensity for lifelong learning has been the driving force that has shaped the life of Maggie Brinsley. A native of England, she began school right after WWII in a one-room building where children, ages 6 through 11, received instruction. Her family had settled in Oxfordshire, in a tiny village that looked much like pre-industrial England. Most of the houses lacked electricity and indoor plumbing. “After the war the English infrastructure was just devastated. Public transportation was virtually non-existent,” she said.

Attending high school in the county of Wiltshire, Brinsley found that she loved learning and looked forward to furthering her studies. “I wanted to go to the university, which was unheard of in our family. My father had retired from the Royal Air Force and returned to village life, farming poultry. He wanted me to leave school at 15 and marry a well-to-do farmer. He thought I could bring some wealth or fortune to the family,” she recalled.

Brinsley’s teachers interceded, persuading her parents to allow her to finish her studies in the secondary school system and later attend the University of Southampton. She flourished academically, earning a Bachelor of Arts in History with honors. With recognition and recommendations from faculty, she was accepted as a graduate exchange student by the U.S. Department of State’s Fulbright Program.

“It was the most incredible opportunity for me,” said Brinsley, smiling. “I remember arriving on the east coast of the United States by boat and only then realizing that I still had 3,000 more miles to go across country.” As a Fulbright scholar for two years, Brinsley completed a master’s in history at the University of Oregon in Eugene. With the expiration of her visa and student exchange status, she moved to Canada, teaching at private schools while awaiting the approval of her application for re-entry to the U.S.

Brinsley then became a doctoral candidate at the University of Washington in Seattle, completing a Ph.D. in history. With the east coast a priority because of her interest in colonial American history, she landed two one-year positions, first at Bryn Mawr College then at Temple University, where she taught a variety of history courses. “I was very lucky to get these positions because many of my contemporaries, who also had doctorates, were finding it virtually impossible to get a job in academia,” she noted.

In the 1970s Brinsley secured a full-time position at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) where she broke new ground, developing courses on the history of women. “I was fascinated by this subject and realized that there was so much more to know about those who were neglected in the typical histories.” Brinsley then moved to an assistant professorship at Hood College in Frederick. Since Hood was a women’s college, her courses on the history of



women were very popular and heavily attended. But after 11 years of teaching, she made a conscious decision to change careers, moving to the administrative side of education in Hood's graduate school.

Two years later Brinsley accepted a full-time position in administration at Towson University. "Since I had loved teaching, I was very surprised that I liked academic administration so much. I realized that I liked to run things and see results." The 17 years she spent at Towson would pass quickly with Brinsley moving every two to three years into assignments with ever-increasing challenge and responsibility, culminating in a position as Assistant Dean of the College of Graduate and Continuing Education.

Throughout her career in higher education, Brinsley published articles and reviewed books for academic journals. She received numerous honors, awards and citations for her vision, leadership and professional achievements, and was a frequent panelist and presenter at high-level conferences, committees, councils, and workshops.

But Brinsley's most satisfying career experiences came from mentoring students and associates, drawn to her clear thinking, compassion and composure, as they waded through the complexities of academia. "When I look back on my life," she noted, "I would like to think that I have helped a few and perhaps left a legacy."

In 2000 Brinsley retired from Towson University, thinking that she would ratchet down her workday and enjoy a slower pace. But her intellectual curiosity would overcome any of her initial considerations. She began teaching history courses at senior centers in Anne Arundel County and volunteered as a docent at Historic London Town and Gardens, eventually becoming its Director of Development for 18 months.

But the groundwork had been laid for the defining experience thus far in Brinsley's retirement. At Towson she had helped to start an Institute for Learning in Retirement with 300 charter members. Now that she was retired, she looked for a lifelong learning group to join, similar to the one she had experienced at Towson. With none in Anne Arundel County, she approached Louann Tracy, Anne Arundel Community College's Director of Lifelong Learning.

It took two years and the professional efforts of AACC's staff and a bevy of volunteers to structure the complex initiative. Classes began in 2004 and by the fall of 2005, the Peer Learning Partnership (PLP) program at AACC elected its first Board of Directors with Brinsley serving as President.

From the initial steering committee of 12 people, the PLP has flourished into a self-directed learning community, now at over 140 members, who help develop, participate in and facilitate courses, all as volunteers. Members also contribute their time and expertise to the PLP by staffing committees for Curriculum, Hospitality and Outreach, Marketing and Public Relations, and Friday discussion and interest groups. "We fill a niche; there's no doubt about it. It's been a wonderful evolution, and I have been very delighted to see it all happen."

In addition to serving as its first president and contributing her personal energy to several of the committees, Brinsley has continued her quest for lifelong learning by facilitating numerous PLP courses such as: In Search of the Sacred Feminine; Immigration in American History; Women in American Politics; Past Civilizations and their Legacy; 1776, the Road to Revolution; England under the Tudors; Gender Stereotypes in American Films, and Witchcraft in Salem.

A multi-dimensional senior, Brinsley has sandwiched a good deal of travel in between her PLP course facilitation and committee responsibilities. She and her husband Jim have sailed extensively and explored Alaska and Texas by road. She also manages to fit in weekly sessions in swimming and aerobic exercise. "I'd love to do more sailing," she said with a sigh, "but there just doesn't seem to be enough time now that I'm retired."