

Clark College
Mature Learning
instructor Bill
Fuller leads a
group of senior
citizens on a
recent wine
tasting excursion
at Syncline
Winery in Hood
River, Ore.

CONTINUED PHOTO

Baby Boomers' excellent adventures

□ Mature Learning program at Clark College gives seniors the opportunity to explore

By Heather Acheson
Post-Record staff

Way back when, entering the "Golden Years" meant slowing down, playing a few rounds of golf, and maybe taking a few trips in the motor home. Not so today, when senior citizens ages 55 and older are some of the most inquisitive and adventurous folks around.

Each year, approximately 2,000 of these active individuals have found an outlet to explore their interests through the Clark College Mature Learning program, according to program manager Tracy Reilly-Kelly.

"Baby Boomers are poised and are entering the ages of retirement, and I am one of those people," she said. "We are going to reinvent retirement in the same way we've reinvented every age we've hit."

The Mature Learning program provides the opportunity for seniors to go on regional excursions, as well as take classes that cover topics including cooking, fitness, art and writing.

The excursions are among the most popular. On the schedule for June, July and August are a discovery tour through southwest Washington with author Pat Jollota, a trip to a Seattle Mariners baseball game when they play against the Yankees at Safeco Field in Seattle, a Columbia Gorge adventure with author John Harrison, and a whale watching trip to Depoe Bay, Ore., coupled with a visit to the Hatfield Marine Science Center.

"These are all very stimulating to people and it makes a huge difference to keep people's minds alive," Reilly-Kelly said. "There is abundant brain research to support the idea of 'use it or lose it.' Learning something new or learning something complex has been shown to stave off forgetfulness and Alzheimer's. There is nothing that fits the bill more than the classes we offer."

According to Reilly-Kelly, studies show that today's senior citizens are interested in a variety of activities, and want the opportunity to broaden their horizons by learning a new skill such as computer use, in addition to taking trips and exploring beyond their own neighborhoods.

"Baby Boomers are going to have much more open retirement lifestyles," she said. "I

think all of these trends are just fun and fascinating. The face of retirement is full of these different paradigms."

Monies to support the Mature Learning program, which has existed at Clark for 38 years, come from a variety of sources, including the Plus-50 Initiative.

"We float the boat through a whole series of actions and interventions," she said. "And, we do get state funding."

Clark is one of 15 colleges from around the country to earn the Plus-50 grant. It's a three-year award that funnels a total of \$70,000 in to the college's Mature Learning program. The other Washington State colleges to receive the monies include the Community College of Spokane and Clover Park Technical College in Tacoma.

There's a reason, Reilly-Kelly said, that Washington has such a high percentage of colleges that were awarded the initiative.

"Washington State has the highest number of people over age 50 attending community college in the U.S.," she explained. "We've made our community colleges very accessible. We have a more educated population in that age bracket. There are a lot of interesting interpretations one could give to that statistic."

Reilly-Kelly, who has worked at Clark College for 19 years, the past 11 as part of Mature Learning, said the program's participants range in age from 50 to into their 80s and 90s. And their backgrounds and life situations

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are just as diverse, from single men and women to couples who have been married for decades.

"What I find to be true is there is a kind of unity between the kind of people who decide to take a class and go on an excursion," she said. "The age factor just melts away. You can go on these excursions and immediately be in the company of many fine people, including seniors."