

St. John Valley Senior College



Learning for the Love of Learning

This fall marks the start of the third season of learning at The St. John Valley Senior College. It is a true collaborative effort, created by the Fort Kent Elderly Social Action Council, Maine School Administrative District #27's Adult and Community Education Program, and UMFK.

The mission of The St. John Valley Senior College (SJVSC) is to provide exciting, intellectually-stimulating, non-credit courses, and special learning opportunities. Courses are taught by volunteers to students age 50, and

above, and their younger spouses or partners. There are no tests, no papers, and no grades in Senior College. Senior College charges a \$25 annual membership, plus an additional, modest fee for each course. Scholarships are available to assist with course fees.

Senior College participants are engaged in learning activities as either students or instructors. They discover new things about themselves, the world around them, and about their friends and neighbors.

By interacting with their friends, neighbors, and peers, senior learners can share life experiences, and learn new ones. Senior College keeps participants connected, allows them to network, keeps them mentally sharp and alert, and helps them maintain a sense vitality and productivity.

The SJVSC was created by the Fort Kent Elderly Social Action Council; M.S.A.D. #27 Adult and Community Education Program; and UMFK. The SJVSC holds most of its classes on



the UMFK campus. And while many of the “students” of senior college are UMFK alumni, it is open to everyone. The SJVSC serves the entire St. John Valley.

How it all came about

Seven seniors were recruited during a quarterly meeting of the Fort Kent Senior Citizens in July 2007, following a presentation about forming a Senior College in Fort Kent by Peter Caron ('82), director of M. S. A. D. #27's adult and community education, and Don Eno ('91), the former coordinator of academic outreach/distance education at UMFK.

The seven members: Burnette Bowker ('60), Venette King ('56), Ellery “Arms” Labbe, Elizabeth Pecoraro ('57), Irvin Roy, and Lucien and Marie Theriault, formed a steering committee, along with other community members. The steering committee was guided through the organizing process by the director of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Southern Maine. It formed bylaws, curriculum, financial, and membership committees.

Today, Bowker serves as the chair of the organization's board of directors. Roy is its vice chair, and Lucien Theriault is the

After eight months of committee and monthly meetings, the SJVSC was accepted as the 18th Senior College in Maine. The college received “seed money” to help defray expenses as it began its venture of providing a distinctive array of classes and activities for adults interested in learning simply for the joy of learning. Today, it is governed by a fifteen-member board of directors, with the assistance of Caron; Scott Voisine, UMFK's dean of students; and Betty Pecoraro ('57), Fort Kent senior citizen liaison.

How it works

Since its first session in the spring of 2008, the SJVSC has offered more than 50 courses. Classes are brought alive by more than 40 experts who have shared their knowledge, time, talents and expertise in presenting stimulating classes about history, current events, music, politics, the humanities, science health, Acadian culture, math, places of interest, and much more.

Students and class instructors have come from all across the Valley.

Although instructors are not paid to teach classes, they do so willingly. Several instructors have returned to teach additional courses

about stories that were in the news that day.”

Banville says he would gladly teach another course.

A Member of the College Community Project

Senior College is part of UMFK's College Community Project – the lifelong approach to college readiness and learning. According to Dean Voisine, Senior College was a natural for the continuum of learning that is the College Community Project.

“Initially, Senior College was not part of the College Community Project, said Voisine. “But with its addition, the project changed from a college-readiness program, to one of college readiness and learning. It is wonderfully symbolic to have a continuum of learning that spans early age, through senior learners. Senior College has been a great addition.”

Voisine sees Senior College as a crucial component in UMFK's mission of educating people throughout the St. John Valley.

“Senior College gives seniors an opportunity to learn in a college setting. There is no need to have graduated college, or even have gone through high school. There are seniors in the community who take nearly

“The wisest mind has something yet to learn.”

George Santayana: Spanish-American philosopher, essayist, poet, and novelist.

treasurer. Labbe, Pecoraro, King, and Marie Theriault all are directors.

According to M.S.A.D. #27's Peter Caron, Senior College fills a void in community education by allowing the seniors themselves to determine what they want to learn.

“There is a significant age 50+ population in the St. John Valley. M.S.A.D. #27 and UMFK simply facilitated the Fort Kent Elderly Social Action Council in organizing a Senior College, based at UMFK. We got them in on the ground floor, and they run the program. The seniors determine what courses that Senior College offers, they distribute information about the program, and they determine the classes and the instructors. The seniors are in the driver's seat. Senior College is ideally suited to the robust senior learner population in our community,” Caron adds.

because of the enthusiasm exhibited by students. The college's board of directors puts its efforts into finding instructors, rather than in developing courses. The board looks to find instructors who desire to teach a course to senior learners. The board also encourages instructors to teach courses within their hometown in order to broaden SJVSC's reach within the Valley.

Retired journalist, Beurmond Banville, twice taught a course entitled: Musings of a “Beat” Reporter; a two-hour class on journalism in the St. John Valley. He fondly recalls his classes. He noted that his students ranged in age from 60-93 years of age.

“I had a great time,” Banville says. “Everyone asked great questions and everyone participated. We talked about news events that occurred years ago, and we talked

every course offered and tell their children and grandchildren ‘I'm going to college...and you can too.’ That's a wonderful thing.”

What's Next?

Bowker, chair of the organization's board of directors, sees a great future for Senior College.

“When we began forming a senior college, we felt it was important to call it the St. John Valley Senior College in order to give it its own identity. Now, we would like to extend the reach of its classes to include Van Buren, Madawaska, Allagash, and many other surrounding towns. We think it is important for senior learners from all across the St. John Valley to experience learning for the love of learning,” Bowker says.

