Don Wilson was looking for a way to learn “just for the fun of it.” Having explored many programs in Rhode Island, including Brown University’s BCLIR and URI’s continuing education among others, he felt that nothing was quite right for him. ...until he happened to meet a visitor from Maine. In the course of conversation he learned about the Osher Foundation’s lifelong learning program and the funding that would be available if certain criteria were met.

After approaching several URI department heads, Don finally met Phil Clark of the Gerontology Department and things began to take shape. According to Don, he was merely the catalyst in forming OLLI at URI. “All I had to do was get out of the way and Phil Clark and his staff worked out everything else,” which included developing the grant proposal, finding office and classroom space, and making arrangements for member parking. It took about a year. Then, in the winter of 2009, with two part-time office staff and a handful of volunteers recruited largely by Clark et al, OLLI at URI got going. Within the first year, the goal of recruiting 100 members was met and so qualified for a second Osher grant. Now in its tenth year, OLLI at URI has three full-time employees, over 1300 members and offers classes all 3 semesters with over 250 course offerings each year. All thanks for the unrelenting effort of its many volunteers such as Don Wilson.

Don felt that here in Rhode Island we are ideally situated to maintain a vibrant lifelong learning community. Through the years he continued to learn, participate in program planning and recruiting faculty and served as a member of the Advisory Board.

As we celebrate our 10th year at OLLI we thank Don for his desire to continue learning and for his initiative to bring OLLI to URI.

Don fell in love with science as a boy and earned degrees in Electrical Engineering and a doctorate in Physics. He spent his career as a Physicist at Bell Laboratories in New Jersey. He was also a proud U.S. Navy Veteran of World War II serving on destroyers in the Atlantic Theatre. He continued to learn until his passing in 2011.

Member profile written by Mary Keane