



Seniors in College

Five years into retirement, Bob Carlson '69W (EdD) embarked on a new challenge.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

FOR MORE THAN 25 YEARS, **BOB CARLSON** '69W (EdD) taught in the education school at the University of Vermont, served as an independent educational consultant, and authored three books on school reform. Then the Buffalo native retired along with his wife, Donna, to the milder clime of southwest Florida.

Five years later, he was back at work.

"I think I was looking for some challenge having been out of the university and missing that kind of dynamic socialization with faculty and graduate students," he says. He's now in his seventh year as executive director of the Pierian Spring Academy, a Sarasota nonprofit that offers college-level,

▲ **CONTINUING ED:** The zest for learning is ageless, says Carlson, the director of the Sarasota-based Pierian Spring Academy, which offers enrichment education to retired seniors.

seminar-style courses targeted to the area's sizeable population of retirees.

Carlson first encountered the academy as a student. He began taking courses on philosophy, and in discussions on thinkers from Plato to Camus, Carlson made an impression—so much so, that seven years ago, the academy's director asked Carlson to be his replacement.

"He had heard about me and my background from some of the students in the classes I was taking," Carlson explains. "I was a little hesitant to take it on.

"But I saw a lot of interesting possibilities."

The Warner School graduate whose research, administrative, and consulting work had all focused on topics such as organizational change and educational planning and evaluation, adapted easily to the task of building the then modest-sized academy into a thriving institution modeled after a small college.

"We had one venue and maybe about a

dozen courses, and I just saw so much more potential for its growth," he says. Now the academy offers more than 70 courses to more than 600 students at three venues. A dean of faculty is in charge of recruiting and retaining the academy's instructors, most of them professors at local colleges and universities or retired professors from around the country.

Stan Nikkel, a former professor of sociology who serves as the academy's dean of faculty, says "the instructors we've recruited are very, very good, and Bob has had a role in that."

Nikkel adds that Carlson has offered "a sense of direction, as well as the practical side of finding venues and handling registrations." Those registrations became numerous enough under Carlson's watch that the academy also hired a full-time administrator.

"Obviously we're fulfilling an important need," says Carlson.

Indeed. Retirees in the United States are

not only becoming more numerous; they're becoming better educated. And that means an expanding market for educational and cultural programming targeted to people over age 65.

It's a need that's being filled by retirement communities, assisted living facilities, or independent organizations like the academy. Sometimes universities play a direct role. Rochester, for example, offers "UR Always Learning"—a series of lectures and enrichment courses taught by university faculty—to residents of the Highlands, a senior community affiliated with the University.

The academy is similarly focused on the liberal arts and sciences, as opposed to "how-to" courses. And academy students—many of them retired doctors, lawyers, teachers, and even a few college presidents, according to Nikkel—are frequently adventurous, delving into the controversial, new, and contemporary. Courses on the politics of race and gender, modern geopolitics, and world religions are popular standards. Carlson, who's also a faculty member, teaches Understanding American Education, an examination of a system he describes as "overly subscribed and undernourished" as well as "the most complex and political of any educational system in the world."


Students can delve into courses to the degree they choose. Some, according to Nikkel, come to listen, while others will devour the recommended reading assignments.

Carlson offers a similar assessment.

"We have some pretty interesting and challenging courses," says Carlson—who, in one of the academy philosophy courses, developed a keen interest in the not-so-accessible 20th-century French philosopher Michel Foucault.

"The people who show up to those classes—not everyone, but a lot—have read the background material, they've got questions, they engage the faculty member, and sometimes they have as much background as the faculty member, if not more."

Not surprisingly, however, things don't always go smoothly. "With 1,000 registrations, 50 faculty, 2 staff people, and 12 board members, there are issues that come up," he says, laughing.

His most striking observation is the motivation of the students. "This is something that is almost ageless: I see it in people in their mid-80s. They'll tell you they have not lost the zest for learning," says Carlson. "To me, that's a very interesting phenomenon." 



INTERPRETIVE VIEWS: Focusing on the contemporary history of his native Lebanon, Raad works in several media, including still photography—above, prints from the series, "Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut)_Plate 050"; below, a print from "We Decided to Let them Say 'We Are Convinced,' Twice."

Documenting War

Contemporary media artist **Walid Raad** '96 (PhD) has a long list of awards to his name. In March, he added another, one that some fine art photographers consider the grand prize in the field, the Hasselblad Foundation International Award in Photography.

Working in a variety of media—still photography, video, audio, performance, and essays—Raad has focused his art on the contemporary history of his native Lebanon, and in particular, on the representation of traumatic events during the civil war that took place there from 1975 until the early 1990s.

Raad spent most of his childhood and his early teens in East Beirut and settled later in the United States, where he earned his undergraduate degree in fine art photography from the Rochester Institute of

Technology. In 1989, he entered Rochester's then new Graduate Program in Visual and Cultural Studies.

In an online chat moderated by the foundation following the announcement, Raad said, "Some extreme situations permit artists, writers, and thinkers to produce new concepts and forms." As far as his focus on the wars in Lebanon, he said, "There are certain images, sounds that I cannot get out of my mind. They stay with me."

The Hasselblad Foundation has recognized a single photographer annually since 1980. "Walid Raad is one of the most original and singular contemporary artists using photography," the five-member award committee noted in a joint statement regarding their decision.

—Karen McCally

