Retirees head back to the classroom

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MANSFIELD — The University of Connecticut doesn't put an age limit on learning.

In fact, UConn offers an educational program that amounts to a golf course for the mind, a place for retirees to learn a thing or two and get out of the house.

UConn's Center for Learning in Retirement provides retirees and older adults with opportunities to learn and socialize in single classes and ongoing courses.

The center has been running since 1981, when the UConn Board of Trustees approved its establishment through the UConn Extension program.

Cathy Cementina, the curriculum co-chairman, has been involved with the program for several years.

She said, although the program is not limited to retirees, because of the morning and afternoon scheduling, mostly retirees are able to attend.

Many of those teaching the classes are retired as well and do so on a volunteer basis.

"All the presenters volunteer their time," Cementina said. "A large portion are from UConn, but we also have presenters visit from Eastern (Connecticut State University) and, sometimes, people from industry and the community. It's really generous of them."

Classes are held in the UConn Depot Campus on Route 44.

Cementina said a minimal fee of $20 is charged each season and attendees can go to all classes within that period.

At a recent single course Feb. 1, attendees learned about American musical theater.

Alex Nakhostovsky of the Hartt School of Music at the University of Hartford and local singer June Bisanz played both familiar and unfamiliar Broadway classics from the 1930s to the 1960s.

The duo was joined by retired UConn education professor and trumpeter Vin Rogers.

In between songs and reflections from "Annie Get Your Gun," "Cameo," "Funny Girl" and more, Rogers entertained the audience with stories from his past.

The Mansfield resident said he hosted pop star Rihanna at his house on Thompson Road twice.

His son is also a musician and runs a production company and was one of the people who discovered and helped sign Rihanna, an award-winning singer.

"The musical performances are very popular," Cementina said. "It's unbelievable what our members are interested in. They are extremely educated and attentive."

Cementina said even a recent presentation on unc acid drew a crowd.

"You think, oh my gosh, who wants to go to that? There must have been over 30 or 40 people," Cementina said.

The classes do not have an academic requirement, so folks don't need to sharpen their pencils and take any tests.

All they have to do is sit back, relax — and learn.

Mansfield resident Bill Ryan, who is also a member of the Mansfield Town Council, said he has been attending classes for five or 10 years.

"It's a way to keep yourself involved in the community and keep learning about a variety of things," Ryan said. "I've attended a lot of good classes."

Upcoming classes this semester are about the food waste epidemic, the politics of endangered species, poetry, stem cells and slavery in America.

Visitors are welcome to attend a class or two to try it out before registering as an official member.

More information on UConn's Center for Learning in Retirement is available at clir.uconn.edu.