

1. ESILL: FOOD FOR MIND AND BODY

2. I'm getting older (and so are you!) but it beats the alternative, and I am also more aware that I learn something new just about every day. The brain still works! I've been looking into aging for this presentation. A MacArthur Foundation Study found that "successful agers" say they actually work on keeping their minds sharp, using a variety of mental games and exercises, or just keeping engaged in regular conversation. Research shows that older people can, and do, learn new things and they learn them well. I am passionate about lifelong learning in general and in particular about our local adult education program, the Eastern Shore Institute for Lifelong Learning (ESILL). As I did some research into ESILL's history, I realized I might be preaching to the choir on the values of ESILL so many of you have either taught or taken courses over the years! I'd also like to welcome ESILL Board members who are here today, so we'll be able to answer any questions.

Let's start with the history of this venerable institution of the Eastern Shore.

3 ESILL was founded in 1977 by retired clinical psychologist **Donald M. Lester**. Dr. Lester knew that the latter years of one's life could and should be rich and rewarding. He was sure that a healthy retirement was not the time for mental lethargy, but was the very time to engage in mental pursuits often postponed for work and family responsibilities. Lester had two purposes in mind. First, such an institute would provide for its students, aged 60-plus, intellectual stimulation and continuing growth. For retired professionals and others with intellectual and teaching interests it would provide an opportunity to share learning and educational concerns with their peers.

Dr. Lester's vision was to create a school, in his words, "where learning is for sheer excitement and satisfaction without the stress of bucking for grades, degrees or certificates. And to provide retired teachers and lay scholars the opportunity to teach what they want to teach without having to fit their courses into some Procrustean Bed of departmental and curriculum requirement."

4 I have to confess to a proclivity for getting sidetracked by interesting tidbits. I'll try not to do that too much today, but the term **Procrustean bed** piqued my interest. (*In Greek Mythology Procrustes was a rogue blacksmith and bandit who invited travelers into his home for the night, then either stretching them with his smith's hammer or cutting off their limbs so as to make them fit his guest bed. Thus the term Procrustean bed means when something is forced to fit an arbitrary standard. Public education today sometimes forces teachers to fit content into an developmentally inappropriate format or standard. OK, enough on that.*)

5 Dr. Lester was insistent that ESILL not be an "arts & crafts institute, but that "the curriculum will be liberal arts and science." He said special care would be taken in faculty selection and that "Academic qualifications alone will not secure a position; the ability to translate knowledge in an entertaining way will be very important." By the way, Frank Laraway tells me that Don Lester was also a Universalist minister, and was responsible for the Fellowship's move from meeting in individual homes to meeting at the Quaker Meetinghouse.

6 On Sept 22, 1977, Dr. Lester and others held a public meeting to introduce his idea -- what was originally referred to as the Lifelong Learning Institute, or The Institute. With what's described in a newspaper article as "their usual enthusiasm for a new learning opportunity, about 120 Fairhoppers turned out to learn more about the Institute and give it a hearty welcome (Daphne Reporter). Dr. Lester, who had already gathered some potential instructors, described the institute, its goals and some of the courses, and introduced some of the future faculty. According to the news article, 97 people registered for classes on the spot. Fourteen classes were offered for the first term. The Redeemer Lutheran Church on N. Section St offered its facilities to the fledgling school. Among the goals Dr. Lester's Institute was able to meet were being free to include courses it wants; limit the number of students per class; and to keep the tuition low. No pressure would be placed on students -- no examinations, grades or other stipulations. No one would be required to do extra reading or other out-of-class work. This ensured an environment of ease and relaxation. These principles continue today at ESILL. Five registrants in the early years of the Institute were over 90 years of age. They couldn't see well anymore but they could hear and their faces expressed the sheer joy of learning as they listened, according to an article quoting Mrs. Lee Lester, wife of the founder. (1/31/98)

7 The second term began in mid-January and ran through late March. Courses included Ecology of the Eastern Shore, The Industrial Complex- Where is it Leading Us?, Creative Writing, The Second Battle of Mobile Bay, Conversational Spanish, The Old Testament as Literature, and Behind the Headlines: a Survey of Current Affairs. Originally tuition was \$30 a course for weekly 2-hour classes held from October to Mid December. (Today the tuition rate is a quite inexpensive \$4.50 an hour; the number of hours for each class, along with the number of meetings, varies according to the course.)

By 1985 ESILL was offering 31 courses in 3 locations in Fairhope, Foley and Westminster Village. 173 students attended courses which included Spanish, French, German, Creative Writing, Family History, Myth & Reality, Man's Fatal Flaw, Aging, Herbs, Ecology, and Decorative Arts. As recorded in the 1982-1983 ESILL History, Membership in the Institute at the time included some names familiar to the Unitarian Fellowship: **Arden Flagg**, **Minnie Nonkes**, who taught the Art of birdwatching, **Mary Toulmin**, who served on the Board of Directors, and **Dr. and Mrs. Lamar Rencher**, with Lee Rencher serving on the Bd.

By the way, ESILL originally had a minimum age requirement -- students had to be 60 to take courses and instructors had to be retired to teach. It was thought that older persons preferred to study with and have as instructors people who shared the world events of their own lives. After a few years, experience and changing times indicated that the age requirement was impractical and possibly detrimental. The age was lowered to 50, then to 40, and then was dispensed with altogether sometime in the 80s, to satisfy a growing demand for participation by younger adults who wanted the kind of learning experience the institute provided. These decisions and others were made by a Board of Directors (all-volunteer), which also governs ESILL operations today.

8 In Feb 1987, ESILL's 10th year, the program received the annual Governor's Award from the AL Gerontological Society. ESILL was selected by then Governor Guy Hunt, recognizing ESILL's contribution to the welfare of older Alabamians, specifically **"its accomplishments in the unique and beneficial enhancement of advanced age."** The plaque was installed next to the portrait of ESILL founder Donald Lester which was displayed in the Fairhope Civic Center.

9 An independent membership committee originally called "the Boosters" was formed in December 1982. The purpose of the Boosters, which has been replaced by the Friends of ESILL, is to aid and support the institute in every way and to acquaint members and visitors with past and future activities at ESILL. Friends of ESILL events are still held each year, usually with a speaker or a special program. The reception being held here this afternoon is an example. Currently, a family membership which includes two adults and their children age 12 and over costs just \$35 a year, and includes a \$5 discount on every ESILL course, catalogues mailed to your home, a quarterly newsletter, and invitations to receptions with ESILL faculty. (Yes, that's an advertisement for a worthy organization!)

10 I'm going to be naming some instructors you may recognize and courses that some of you may have taken. **Please raise your hand when you recognize a name of an instructor or a course you took.** I'm not doing this just to be a namedropper but to acquaint you with the ongoing breadth of learning experiences ESILL has offered through the years, and the fact that we Unitarians have always appreciated this.

Courses in 1987 and 1988 included French Pastry Making with **Chef Hans Schindler**. Graphic artist **Ian Robertson**, who recently exhibited his work here at the Fellowship, developed a course about printing titled Seeing What you Read. **Dr. Margaret Gleissner** offered: What Every Family Should Know About Alcoholism. **Hal Parsons** offered a Car Care Clinic. A popular continuing course entitled "Five Foreign Cultures" included a segment on Greece presented by **Dr. Ernest Ehlers** (who lived in Greece during his Fulbright appt as a Senior Fellow). He also taught Earth Science for ESILL. Most of you know he is the late husband of Diane Ehlers. **Terri Cassity** of Mercy Medical taught "Creative Aging", offering advice about coping with changes, and stressing a positive and creative approach to growing older.

11 Here's what Terri had to say about older people! . (PAUSE to read slide) **"They are like diamonds... older people have been thru the fire of life and are deeper and richer for it. You can learn more from them than in any course."**

ESILL's Board President in 1990 was a retired Fairhope general practitioner, **Dr. Howard Wulff**. He was quoted in a local newspaper as saying "there is physiological evidence that the brain of an individual who has had a profession in which the brain was continually challenged, will deteriorate quickly after retiring if it is no longer stimulated." He was, of course, advocating for retirees to take ESILL courses. Dr. Wulff was also a strong advocate of positive thinking. "We all get sick," he said. "But we must learn to not allow ourselves to give in to the illness." A 1994 news article indicates that Dr. Wulff had turned 82, but was still eagerly learning and also teaching others. He offered a course that fall titled "How to Train Your Brain." He was quoted as saying "We don't even begin to use the capability of the brain, and it's so important to keep learning. I assure you that in the next 50 years the life span will grow to 150 years." (We can look forward to that occurring around **2044**, perhaps.) ESILL also had as an instructor Ruby **Leftwick**, participant in over 50 plays from acting to lighting to directing, as well as acting in a

Hollywood movie, Huckleberry Finn. She was active at both Theatre 98 and the Joe Jefferson Theatre. She taught an 8 week course "Who Says You Can't Act?" And raise your hand if you knew **Arden Flagg**. She taught the International Folk Dancing Class, introducing participants to traditional dances of different countries. At the time of this course, Arden was a young 71 years old. Her daughter Holly Couret notes how both her mother and grandmother Eleanor Nichols took advantage of what ESILL had to offer through the years. Holly particularly recalls when her mother and grandmother, who was then in her 80s, took one of ESILL's Spanish courses, and tagged items all around the house with Spanish labels to help them master the language.

12 In 2002, ESILL's 25th year celebration included a series of free lectures entitled "**Five Hundred Years of Baldwin County, 1519-2002.**" ESILL President Dot Bremer said this was ESILL's way of "saying thank you to the community, which has supported our program throughout these 25 years." The series gathered noted scholars and authorities on events, cultures and the environment to provide an in-depth understanding of the forces that have shaped our area. This lecture series was recorded and later distributed on videotape to local schools as an ongoing educational resource. The video-recording is still available in local libraries.

13 In the 1990s ESILL continued to offer interesting and useful topics, including "The Happy Owner and the Well Pet," offered by veterinarian **Dr. Theresa Marshall**, "How to Look Your Best After 55," with **Deborah Ensign**, certified image and color consultant. **Peggy Dyson** taught Southern Culture. A marine biologist, Peggy also taught Genes, Germs and Global Warming: A Look at Current Topics in Science. A course titled "The Environment May Be Sick, What are the Cures?" was offered by our own environmentalist **Debbie Jessup**. (Hands up!) Fairhope Attorney **Richard Bass** offered "Who Gets It When You Go?" Also offered was "A Journey Down Under" with world traveler **Tere Probst**. **Eloise Benford** offered an ongoing class -- Bridge for Beginners, which is still offered today by **Janet Anderson**. (There must be a lot of bridge players on the Eastern Shore by now.) Spring of 1993 saw two new courses, How to Use an IBM Computer for Beginners, and for Intermediates. Surfing the World Wide Web was offered soon after. From then on, computer courses would be a regular part of the curriculum at ESILL.

14 As though amazed by its own longevity, ESILL annually announced in its course catalog the number of years it had been in operation. 1994 was the year that **Stan Hodgin** began what became a hugely popular 5 week course in how to make and play a mountain dulcimer. He is responsible for the proliferation of dulcimer players we still have in this area, many of whom are members of a group he started, The Jubilee Pickers.

15 Other Fellowship Members and Friends joined the ESILL instructors' roster in the 90s: **Gail Gardner** offered knitting classes for several years. Today our FUF Knitters group which meets every Tuesday has the benefit of her experience and expertise.

16 **Bud Gardner** offered a course based on a lifelong interest "History of the Automobile: a Machine that Changed the World." **Celeste Hinds** joined **Minnie Nonkes** to lead the birding classes. In 1999 Minnie was honored for her many years of service to ESILL both as a Board member and instructor. The ESILL birding course continues on today, with several of our current FUF members participating regularly. **Diana Gardiner** is currently the registrar for this class. **Flo Schneider** offered a course in "Conflict

Resolution for Everyone, followed the next year by Resolving Children's Conflicts. Spring 1997 found FUF member **Janet Carole** of the Snyder family offering Basic Ballet for Adults. 1998 ESILL held a reception honoring **Vincentine Williams** for her Years of Service as an ESILL Instructor. She started teaching music appreciation courses in 1981 and is still teaching for ESILL this fall, offering a course titled Classical Music Fundamentals and the Life and Music of Richard Wagner.

17. In 1999 the late **Henry Albers**, a beloved Fellowship member, was described in the Baldwin Register as "The Star-Struck Teacher offering an Out of this World Approach to Science." Henry taught ESILL's popular Astronomy course.

18 After the passing of ESILL's Founder, **Dr. Donald Lester**, he was honored with a handcrafted remembrance. The beautiful pine bench which currently resides outside the Fairhope Welcome Center on Section Street, was built by ESILL Board Members **Stan Hodgin and George Hinds**. The bench was installed and dedicated January 17, 1997.

19 Entering the 21st century, our Fellowship members continued to share their knowledge and talents at ESILL: **Gene Garrett** (late husband of Helen Garrett) offered two photography courses. **Harvey Joanning and Pat Keoughan** taught Communication for Couples. **Jean Lawrence** offered Color Theory, a theoretical and hands-on experience in ways of seeing and using color. (Her color sense has much to do with the beautiful environment of this Fellowship building.) Our current president, **Michael Patrick**, one of our favorite storyteller/historians, offered a course in Alabama Folklore. **Harvey Joanning and Ed Lawrence** teamed up with **Richard Westmoreland** to offer "Spend, Tax and Borrow: How the Fed Handles Our Money." Perhaps we should be having them do a follow-up! Also, a January 2001 news photo showed familiar UU faces on the ESILL Board – **Henry Albers, Carolyn Garbett, Tom Garbett and Flo Schneider**. Celeste Hinds and Bud Gardner each took a turn on the Board as well. **Elaine Snyder-Conn** offered Environmental Contaminants as one of the over 50 courses available from ESILL in 2008. 2010 found three more FUF members engaged in ESILL instruction: **Larry Norris** began teaching Ukulele for Beginners, **Ray Ables** taught Spanish, and I taught Introduction to Hammered Dulcimer, which was when I started getting involved with ESILL.

20. In perusing the photos of ESILL classes, I believe I may have discovered **Mary Van Antwerp** among the students in a class given by our current ESILL president and regular instructor in Literature, **Brenda Huchingson**, who's also visiting with us today.

21 I hope you found the history of ESILL interesting and a trip down memory lane, and perhaps you have some ideas to add to it. But first, the point of this whole presentation: Getting you to take ESILL courses or become an instructor! Not for my benefit, not for ESILL's benefit (it's a non-profit organization, after all), but for your benefit. To that end, let me share a bit of neuroscience regarding the brain.

22 OK, We've all done it. Gone into a room to get something and when we get there, drawn a blank on what it was. We panic a little inside "is this the beginning of the end, brain-wise? Well, we can relax a little. Although it's true the brain slows down a bit in mid life, as science has looked more deeply into how our brains age neuroscience reports the news is good, not bad. Using new technology such as brain scanners, and looking at new results from more sophisticated long-term studies of real people as they age, new research is upending a whole host of myths we've had about middle age in particular and the aging brain in general.

23 According to the Society for Neuroscience, The last decade of the 20th century, proclaimed the "Decade of the Brain," yielded tremendous advances in the field of neuroscience. 1 Perhaps the decade's most surprising finding was the discovery that the human brain is capable of generating new neurons throughout life, a process called **neurogenesis**. Researchers in brain function indicate that neurogenesis is one form of neuroplasticity, referring to all the ways the brain changes. Indeed, studies suggest that new neurons are not only generated throughout life, they also integrate into the circuitry of the brain and actively participate in its functions, specifically memory and learning. Conditions that promote the generation of new neurons, such as physical exercise and healthy diet often are associated with improved memory and learning of tasks. Baylor College of Medicine studies also have shown that learning promotes the survival of new neurons. In fact, active learners seem to retain more new neurons, especially when trained on difficult tasks. (*no video.*)

24 Studies show that foods rich in nutrients and antioxidants (like dark chocolate ó wait until you hear what's coming) appear to reduce the risks of age-related impairment. Aerobic exercise increases blood flow to the brain, and even lessens the rate of tissue loss during aging. The indisputedly oldest documented human, **Jeanne Calment** of France, kept her wits throughout her 122-year life span. This is evident in a Guinness Book interview with her when she was 116 years old. Aside: I became fascinated by this woman while researching. Here are some tidbits: At age 85 she took up fencing. She continued to ride her bicycle until age 100. She was reportedly neither athletic nor fanatical about her health. She ascribed her longevity and relatively youthful appearance for her age to olive oil, which she said she poured on all her food and rubbed onto her skin, as well as daily port wine. And every week she ate nearly one kilo of chocolate (that's over 2 pounds). Not a bad life!

25 The belief that pronounced and progressive mental decline is inevitable was and still is popular for several reasons. For one, until the 20th century, few people lived past 65. In 1900, when average life expectancy was about 47 years, 3 million people, or 4 percent of the population, were older than age 65 and typically were ill. In 2003, when life expectancy was more than 77 years, nearly 36 million people, or more than 12 percent of the population, were older than age 65. A generation ago, frailty was seen among people in their 60s; today it is more typical among those in their 80s. Moreover, few people challenged the notion that aging meant inevitable brain decline because scientists knew little about the brain or the aging process. Today's understanding of how the normal brain ages comes from studies of the nervous system that began decades ago and are just now bearing results. Modern technologies now make it possible to explore the structure and function of the brain in more depth than ever before and to ask questions about what actually happens in its aging cells. Thus, neuroscientists are increasingly able to distinguish between the processes of normal aging and disease. Although some changes do occur in normal aging, they are not as severe as scientists once thought and certainly do not include widespread cell loss.

26 In this 2010 book (slide: *The Secret Life of the Grown-Up Brain*) NY Times Health and Medical Science Editor Barbara Strauch says long-held assumptions that our brains are in a state of gradual decline from a youthful peak have been proven untrue. Fears that memory lapses, names forgotten, and distracted thoughts are the beginnings of more

serious dementia are unfounded. In fact, what we have learned from studying the time we call "middle age" is that the changes that take place as we age give us the best brains of our lives, at their strongest in a whole range of cognitive areas. Strauch says "The long-held assumption that we lose thousands of brain cells as we age is false. Our brains (as long as they are healthy) continue to develop, change, and adapt. Growth of white matter and brain connectors allow us to recognize patterns faster, make better judgments, and not only find unique solutions to problems, but be more creative in a range of areas. She concludes, "One way to keep our brains alive and growing is to actively explore ideas and people that challenge our view of the world.

This "shakes up the cognitive egg," prompting our brain cells to wake up, reconfigure and "with a little luck" rejuvenate."

27 Hopefully I have convinced you of the value of shaking up your brain. And you know about ESILL, "The School for the Fun of It," and how it has always supported this endeavor with its classes. ESILL just happens to be starting a new term, and there's time for you to check out the courses and sign up for one, or two, or if you're like one of our board members, 6 or 7. I've made a list here of the categories in which we have courses - 60 in all this term!

28 Physical exercise is key in keeping the brain in shape - that's one of the strongest recommendations in the current literature on aging. ESILL offers Gentle Chair Yoga and Tai Chi, along with Yoga for Fitness and Stress Management. Call the ESILL instructor and ask about the suitability of one of these for your individual fitness level. Fall Wildflowers of Baldwin County, Walking Fairhope's History, and the Birding Course all get you out and walking. Line Dancing for Beginners is fun if you're up to more strenuous exercise.

29 ESILL can help you expand your social life. Attending any course puts you out there with people who have similar interests. Here are a few ideas: A Jewish Walk Through the Bible; Paints, Pots, Photos and More: Visits with Nine Local Artists in Their Studios (this class gets you out to lunch!); China Painting; Travel Secrets; Gulf Coast Gourmet Redux; or The Roaring 20s: Jesus, Jazz, Gats and Gin - that should be good for some discussion! We also have numerous photography and drawing and painting classes not requiring any special talent. (I know - I took a painting course last year, and I'm no artist.)

30. Shaking up the Cognitive Egg, as Barbara Strauch puts it, means doing something different that challenges your brain. ESILL has that, in spades, literally. Bridge For Beginners! We also have Chess for Everyone, Crochet, Temari, A Spoonful of This and a Sprinkle of That - Cooking With Spices and Herbs. By the way, one of the tips in a book called "You Staying Young, the Owner's Manual for Extending Your Warranty, is adding a dash of this and that to food - several substances such as turmeric and curcumin, for example, have been shown to help cognitive function. ESILL also has several writing courses including the new Feminist Writing Workshop with **Jeanine Normand**. Jeanine is also teaching French Easy. If you just want to kick back and listen, how about "Dead Towns of Alabama", Scientific Expeditions Around the Globe, The Fire Down Below: Volcanoes, or Russian History?

31 In a Mayo Clinic study of people with heart disease, psychological stress was the strongest predictor of future cardiac events. Knowing that stress is damaging to the brain and body, you might consider a new course called "Preparing for Your Later Years: --

being prepared legally and financially reduces stress. (This is being offered by the same person, Carolyn Dohn, who is speaking at this fellowship next week) Aggravated by the accumulation of stuff around your house? We have a two-hour presentation called "Taking Control of Your Home", full of useful tips on decluttering. ESILL's course in Travel Secrets can save you money, time and aggravation when taking a trip. Oh yes, and if you want to catch up with your grandkids, you might want to take our very timely Facebook Basics and Beyond. Get yourself a page on Facebook and make friends!

32 I just can't resist sharing with you one of our newest and definitely a unique course this term: Backyard Poultry Raising. Wouldn't it just be fun to raise some pretty chickens? OK, we also have a new course First Lessons in Beekeeping. ESILL has terms twice a year, starting in late September and again in February. Courses are anywhere from a couple of hours to 8-10 weeks long. Now, pick up one of the Fall 2011 ESILL flyers on the desk in our foyer, or better yet, go to our website, www.ESILL.org, for information on all the courses and how to register.

33. To register, you just call the instructor whose phone number is listed with the course description, ask any questions you have about the course, send your tuition check to the address the instructor gives you, make a note of when and where the first class is held, and get ready to feed your mind and body!

34 Thank you for coming today. I hope to run into you at The School for the Fun of It! We have time for a few questions or short comments about your experiences with ESILL.

- ▶ 35. Thank you slide:
- ▶ Dot Bremer
- ▶ Diana and Jim Gardiner
- ▶ Brenda Huchingson
- ▶ Frank Laraway
- ▶ Juanie Noland
- ▶ Laurie Wiggins
- ▶ All past, present and future ESILL participants

END

Prepared by Ruth Geraci, September 2011