

SUMMARY

Rachel Ramirez, the executive director of the Lifelong Learning Institute (LLI), shares her insights on the power of lifelong learning and the impact it has on individuals and communities. LLI provides academic, social, and fitness courses for midlife and older adults. Rachel emphasizes the importance of working in your passion and how it recharges and refills you. She highlights the benefits of lifelong learning, including mental stimulation, purpose, and community. Rachel also discusses the future of LLI and the availability of similar programs across the nation.

QUOTE

"Lifelong learning is about connecting dots with people who know something worth sharing and people who are interested to learn."

TRANSCRIPT

Jen Yanez Pryor (00:01.486)

Hello and welcome to Aging For All. We're your hosts. I am Jen Yanez -Pryor.

Andrea (00:07.166)

And I'm Andrea Price. Thank you all so much for joining us today.

Jen Yanez Pryor (00:11.884)

On today's episode, we are happy to have Rachel Ramirez. Rachel has been the executive director at Lifelong Learning Institute in Chesterfield, Virginia since March of 2014. She previously worked for four years in IT and as a financial team manager for a nonprofit in Mechanicsville. Before that, she was an assistant branch manager with First Market Bank in Richmond and a store manager at Starbucks Coffee Company.

Rachel has enjoyed attending and serving with Clover Hill Church since 2003 and is grateful for the opportunities she has had to work with Give Hope to Kids, a children's home in the mountains of Honduras. Rachel earned a bachelor's degree in organizational leadership and management from Regent University in 2006 and a master's degree in public administration with a graduate certificate in nonprofit management from VCU in 2018.

Rachel and her husband Luis love spending time with their two boys, their family and friends, as well as biking, hiking, and traveling.

Andrea (01:17.054)

Hello and welcome, Rachel.

Rachel Ramirez (01:19.04)

Thank you so much for having me.

Jen Yanez Pryor (01:21.321)

We are so excited to have you here today.

Andrea (01:25.31)

I guess we, it's an honor not only to have you here, but it's an honor to really have you as a colleague. It's been great just getting to know you and seeing the passion you have for the work you do at the Lifelong Learning Institute. You've been there for 10 years, which is amazing. So tell us a little bit about what you've learned over the course of your time there.

Rachel Ramirez (01:49.826)

Wow. I have learned that working in your passion is a recipe for success. I knew before I came here that I was passionate about people and purpose. And so being able to pair those two passions here at LLI over the last decade has really been meaningful and has allowed me to constantly recharge.

Because I feel like when you're able to work in an area where you're passionate it recharges and refills you and so every day that I'm able to meet a new member or talk to a member who's been here longer than I have or see people find a renewed sense of purpose through their membership and through taking courses or through being involved in a committee or teaching courses that has just been

so fulfilling over the years and never gets old because there's always someone new walking in the door who's about to have their LLI experience and hopefully it will be a very positive impact on their life.

Jen Yanez Pryor (03:03.209)

Wow, that's amazing. For our listeners, could you describe a little bit about what LLI is and what you all do there?

Rachel Ramirez (03:11.203)

Right, so LLI stands for the Lifelong Learning Institute and it was based off of a model, originally it was called Learning in Retirement and then at some point Elder Hostel, which then turned into Rhodes Scholar and all the other institutes they changed to Lifelong Learning Institutes. And so we opened in 2004 as the Lifelong Learning Institute in Chesterfield with a mission to provide lifelong learning opportunities.

for midlife and older adults and we do that through academic, social and fitness courses. And so we operate a daytime program with all of the courses taught by volunteer instructors with the exception of our fitness courses. And members can join for an annual fee, annual membership fee and have unlimited access to all of the courses that are offered.

With last year, we offered over 800 courses and the annual fee was \$150 per person. So we pride ourselves in connecting a lot of dots in the community. So we might meet a member who has an interest in sign language and then we find out that another member knows sign languages and has taught it before. So then we're able to make that a course.

And so this member who wants to learn can learn from this member who knows sign language and is able to share that not only with that member, but 15 or 20 other members who also had the interest. And so that multiplied by thousands of those stories over the course of the years has been what we really enjoy doing. It's just connecting those dots with people who know something that's

worth sharing and then people who are interested to learn that. And that's the learning environment we create, volunteer instructors and volunteer students.

Andrea (05:17.726)

That's great, Rachel. I think it's a beautiful testament to the power of community. So talk a little bit about what that community means. Well, you have the Lifelong Learning Institute, but it is a community. So what does this mean to the people in this community?

Rachel Ramirez (05:34.052)

Yeah, so it is so much bigger than our mission, right? Our mission is to provide lifelong learning opportunities. That means let's organize some classes, let's find some instructors and find some students. And that's the recipe, right? But what we've experienced over the last 20 years is around what I call lifelong learning, our nucleus. And around that is all this beautiful matter of community, right? So it's people coming together.

They may have a common interest, right? They're both taking the amendments to the constitution class. So they have some interest in history, have some interest in our national history. And so they may be sitting next to each other and then might find out that they both played baseball in college or they both were in the finance field or anything like that. They can find these commonalities. And so,

building that community in the classrooms. And then we have a lounge where people can gather before and after classes, or even if they don't have a class on that day for a cup of coffee or work on the puzzle, bring your lunch. And that type of community is built in that space. And then through the committees that we have, people are able to gather around a common cause. We have a social committee and a curriculum committee, a diversity committee.

a library committee and I won't name them all because I'll miss one. But they're all volunteer committees and so they come with some common interest again in the mission of that and the goals of that committee. And so just as an example, I remember very vividly one lady that walked in the door into the office and she had just moved to town because her daughter lived here. Her husband had recently passed away.

And she was pretty lost. Like she, I, if you've ever seen a wilted flower, you can see the potential there, but it's, it's wilted. It needs something to be healthy again. And that was what I, would compare her to when she first walked in. So she took the tour, got a catalog connected with a volunteer. Cause our volunteers do the majority of our tours for potential members and saw something.

Rachel Ramirez (08:00.036)

sparked something that she wanted to join. So she joined, took some classes, was interested in the library, met some of the volunteers in there, and spent some time in the lounge and then learned about other courses that she would be interested in. So within two months, she was coming in, she was volunteering on a committee, she was taking classes, she was spending time in the lounge connecting with the community and with her newfound friends. She was volunteering on our monthly luncheon, not only to

serve the drinks and the food like we had asked her to because she joined that committee. She was dressing up like the character that went with that theme. So she dressed up like a turkey, you know, at Thanksgiving. And so she just brought so much joy. She had been re-, like she had flourished again.

you know, her wilted flower had gotten the sunshine and the water that it needed and it was bloomed once again. It was just such a beautiful picture that she had received joy through the connections and through being seen and feeling, you know, having that sense of belonging, having that renewed sense of purpose, and then that spilled over into everyone she interacted with and everyone was able to receive that joy.

Jen Yanez Pryor (09:23.3)

I love that story, Rachel. Thank you for sharing that. And I think that through stories like this, we can see some of that one-to-one benefits, but we know that lifelong learning has documented evidence of being impactful and bringing benefits to larger groups. And I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about what you know of the research behind staying engaged in anything as we continue to grow older.

Rachel Ramirez (09:53.668)

Yeah, so I say the top three, or I guess it would be my top three favorite benefits of lifelong learning are mental stimulation, purpose, and community. And so mental stimulation is obviously just seeing new things, hearing new things, and experiencing new things is good for the brain. And you don't have to be a neuroscientist to know that or to see that.

Hopefully we've all seen the benefits of that in our personal lives and then also in the lives of others. And then the purpose, I mean there are so many studies that if people just simply have a purpose, then they live longer. And it's not just one segment of the population, it's everyone. Everyone from birth.

To have needs a purpose and needs something to get up for in the morning something to focus on something to do And so that is so baked in to so the mental stimulation and the lifelong learning are just baked in they are key ingredients to the lifelong learning cake And then community I say is the icing on the cake, right? So it is It's just such a sweet topping that we can find

that so many people can find belonging within this community of learners. And there are a lot of studies about social connection being the antidote for social isolation, especially with the attorney general's report that came out last year and the epidemic of social isolation and loneliness. And so I love, it's so encouraging that the end of that report says,

Social connection is the answer. It's not some magic pill. It's not some fancy new therapy method. It's social connection. And it can be as simple as picking up a phone or meeting someone for lunch. And again, that icing on the cake is baked in here because it is a part of our culture. You come in and it's really choose your own adventure because people can come in if they just...

Rachel Ramirez (12:12.905)

signed up for membership and just want to take a Spanish class or a computer class to learn about a particular app or their phone. They can do that. They can come in. They can sit in class. They can learn what they want and they can go on their merry way. If

that's what they want to get out of it, then that's what they'll get. If they came in and they're interested in being a part of the social community, then they're certainly

lots of wide open doors for that. And so then I think it has a ripple effect because those members who experience that social connection and that positive impact on their life, they're going out into the community, into their neighborhoods or into their apartment buildings, wherever they live, and sharing that with others. One of my favorite stories of how word of mouth is our best advertising tool.

is one of the members who is super involved now, coordinates a couple of groups, volunteers in the office every week. She found out about LLI sitting in a pedicure chair because she was sitting next to a member who had just come from a class or was just getting ready to go to a class and they just struck up a conversation and she left that, her nail's still drying and drove over and got a catalog and never looked back.

Andrea (13:38.782)

That's wonderful. I think that the social connection piece of the work you do is invaluable to not only the individual, but to the community at large. Like you said, the community is the icing on the cake. Can you speak a little bit about what you see for the future of LLI, not just here in Chesterfield, and then talk a little bit about the availability of these types of programs across the nation through the network?

Rachel Ramirez (14:08.713)

Sure. If I talk about the future, I have to talk about the past. I hope that's okay. But we started 20 years ago, March of 2004, with 61 charter members and offered 18 courses in that first session, that spring 2004 session. So fast forward to today, we offered 299 courses in our spring session this year.

Andrea (14:13.406)

Yes!

Rachel Ramirez (14:38.281)

and have over 1,350 active members. I don't know the percentage growth. I love numbers, but I don't have that memorized. But that's a lot of growth in 20 years. So if I look out, and I hope to be here another 20 or 30 years, if we follow that same trajectory, it's gonna be amazing. And we have continually planned to be ahead of the curve.

ahead of the demand curve with more supply. So we may have 20,000 seats available for classes in our summer session and 10,000 or 11,000 of those get registered for. So

we've got a lot of space. We have classes that fill up and we try to duplicate those and make another one, another learning opportunity when we see the demand.

but we really have a lot of open seats so that people coming in as new members, they have a menu to choose from. It's not all booked up and sorry, wait for next semester. So the future, you know, I see continuing to grow our online courses and our in-person courses and really tailoring it to the membership. We have an ideas list that when the curriculum committee reviewed it last week had

13 pages over 350 ideas that have come in in the last 10 years since I started compiling the list. And that is the curriculum committees marching orders. So they try to connect those ideas with new instructors or existing instructors telling them an idea for a future course. So and that means that we're creating courses that are interesting to.

our members. And I think anytime I talk to a group that is thinking about starting, maybe not a whole lifelong learning institute, but just wanting to dive into the lifelong learning space, I say make it grassroots and find out what people want to learn. Start there. Even if you start with two or three things, start there and then grow it from there based on the interests of the members or the participants.

Rachel Ramirez (17:00.425)

So that is what I see as our future is staying laser focused on our mission, continuing to do the work that we're doing and just growing with our membership and with the community. And then the second question was about LLIs across the country. And there are over 400 lifelong learning institutes in the country. And there are directories if you just go online and search for a lifelong learning directory.

something will pop up, we'll have a list, you know, so if you're listening and you're in another area. There are about fifteen in Virginia and so most of them are tied geographically to a college or university. So our sponsoring university is VCU, specifically the Virginia Center on Aging and Department of Gerontology. And so that's our sponsoring university. We have a unique situation because twenty years ago when they were

cultivating this idea they partner not only with VCU but also with our local government with Chesterfield County and Chesterfield County had space they had a building that wasn't being used during the day and so that's where we built our program and where we still reside today in Midlothian and so most of the LLIs are geographically located

with their college or university, either right off campus or even using the buildings on campus. So if you are listening and you don't live near Chesterfield or in the Greater Richmond area, you can just Google your city or town with lifelong learning and probably find the one that's closest to you. We do as well as a lot of the LLIs offer online courses. And so we have members.

who don't live close enough to drive in for classes, but they just take our online courses. And that all came, that was a silver lining from the pandemic. And so we, we do have 51 zip codes represented in our membership in the Richmond area. There is an Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Richmond. They have a robust, robust program on campus there. So I say get involved wherever you can.

Rachel Ramirez (19:20.233)

so you can reap the benefits of lifelong learning.

Jen Yanez Pryor (19:24.191)

Wow, that's great. I love how extensive this is. And it's one of those things for me that you don't necessarily realize how big this is until you really dig into the numbers. I'm curious, because you said at the beginning, you all serve the middle to older adult population. How do you help people understand, you know,

Is this for me? Can I do this? Because I could see some people being interested and then thinking, talking themselves out of it, and giving the benefits.

Rachel Ramirez (20:01.865)

Yeah. Yeah. So we have a 47 year old member and a 100 year old member. So we, we don't, I mean, I think we have on some publishing materials, if 50 and better, you know, as far as age, but that's just a guide. I say anyone who self identifies as a midlife or older adult is welcome here. And so, you know, I think that.

people can come and feel comfortable because we do have such a wide age range. We have so much diversity across so many different layers. We have people from all over the world as members and just the rich life experience and wisdom that our members hold and share is so humbling. So I would say the...

the best thing to do is to come out for a tour and just set eyes on it. Get your hand on a catalog. There are over 230 courses in the summer catalog. So we don't have, it's our slowest session, but not by much anymore. And I would just say, you know, jump in and give it a try. You know, we have some people that try it for a year and maybe.

It's not their cup of tea. You know, we are all unique and the beauty of aging is that we become more of ourselves as we age and become more individuals. So, you know I am the first to say like if you don't enjoy it find something you do enjoy because there's something out there for everyone we have found that a lot of people who join do renew year after year because they find a lot of value in it

But I say to anybody, give it a try. Find the courses that are interesting to them and give feedback. We always, we love feedback. We have official feedback channels for each course and then we always accept informal feedback as well and always look for opportunities to improve.

Andrea (22:12.35)

I think it's beautiful, your phrase, we become more of ourselves as we age. Through your work, how has your view of aging been shaped or even changed through your work with LLI?

Rachel Ramirez (22:26.345)

Yeah, I think I was, I have been in such a fortunate position because I've always had a close relationship with my grandmothers. My paternal grandmother lived to be 98 and my maternal grandmother was a member of LLI before I came into this position and she lived to be 95 and just passed away last year. And so being able to see someone's longevity.

across my lifespan. I mean, when I was born, they were both in their 50s. And to just be able to experience that as a grandchild, I, you know, people complain about aging or complain about getting older or complain about the decline and this, you know, area of that. And I say, aging is beautiful. You know, I really truly believe that. And of course it comes with its challenges, but all of life has challenges.

I mean, I haven't gone through a year of my life and I'm only 38 without challenges and without storms and trials and things to navigate. So I just try to shine positivity and try to, with my grandmother who lived here and was a member of LLI, I would often encourage her to refocus. So she would call me and you know, her...

her shoulder was hurting or something else was bothering her. I said, I'm sorry that's happening. I'm glad you went to the doctor and got it checked out. Now it's a time to refocus. What are the good things that are going on? Who can you call to uplift and then in turn, feel that support and uplifting? I think that aging is an adventure and it's a journey and each one of us will traverse our journey.

with our outlook being the guiding force, right? As if you want to find the negative, it's there every day of everyone's life. You can find it. So I just say focus on the positive, focus on what you do have, and then always be looking for ways to learn and grow. And like we said earlier, become more of yourself and share that.

Jen Yanez Pryor (24:43.05)

I love that. And we all know that, you know, reframing the way that we see aging too, helps our health and wellbeing all around, you know, and has positive impacts on our longevity. And, you know, that just goes along with everything that you've talked about in terms of benefits of just lifelong learning and staying engaged with your community. Before we go, I was wondering what other...

Things you want our listeners to know about, what other words of wisdom do you have for us?

Rachel Ramirez (25:14.449)

Well, like you mentioned, the longevity, the outlook, I think it's seven years that they've found that you add to your life if you have a positive view on your aging. Seven happens to be my favorite number, so sign me up if I can be around for seven extra years and see my kids grow and flourish seven extra years and sign me up for that.

I'm so grateful for the opportunity to talk with you all and aging for all has certainly become a passion of mine to really, like you said, knock down those walls of ageism, the self -ageism, the self -directed and the others and even the implicit, the things that can go unnoticed if you don't have your ageism detector out. So I would say just continuing to...

find ways to encourage people to live life every day with purpose and within community. And I think that that will have a really positive impact on our community and our culture. And hopefully in my lifetime, I will see this ageism flip on its head and become where, you know, our elders are respected and valued and their wisdom.

is cultivated on a daily basis and shared. That's my dream.

Jen Yanez Pryor (26:43.53)

I love that vision.

Andrea (26:43.806)

You are living it, Rachel. You are the embodiment of everything you just said. It's been a pleasure just to know you, and it's been an even greater pleasure to hear your story today on this podcast. So thank you.

Rachel Ramirez (26:59.058)

Thank you so much.

Jen Yanez Pryor (27:00.97)

Yes, thank you, Rachel, for joining us. And I want to thank all of our listeners for tuning in. This has been a very engaging conversation.

Andrea (27:11.55)

Yes, and please join us next time for another amazing episode of Aging For All.