

Expanding Our World for 25 Years



EDMONTON
**lifelong
learners**
ASSOCIATION

25
2001-2026

Time to celebrate the first quarter century



ELLA Presidents 2026 to 2001

**Brian Sawyer
Steve Chambers
Lynne Mansell
Vivian Mattia
Gertie Dean**

**Shirley Forrest
Joyce Madsen
Carol Vaage
John Elliot
Nancy Rae**

**Ray Lieberman
Larry Judge
Marg Stephan
Alainnah Robertson
Marilyn Chinnery**



President & Publisher: Rob Suggitt
Graphic Designers: Cailey Welk / Kate Suggitt

A message from ELLA President Brian Sawyer



I use the word 'sharing' because one of the best things about ELLA is that our education model is not just one-way lectures, it's about the 'lived knowledge' that erupts spontaneously in most of our classes – the discussions are lively, the viewpoints diverse, and the connections we make grow the fabric of our community year after year.

We started as University of Alberta extension courses for 'mature students' in 1976, and 25 years later formalized ourselves as the Edmonton Lifelong Learners Association when the university wound down the 'mature' program.

I am excited to be sharing this publication with you on ELLA's 25th Anniversary.

Until the timeline compilation in this book, I had assumed our ascent was a relatively smooth trajectory of slow growth generated by the efforts of dedicated volunteers and our excellence in program delivery.

The history and stories you will read include innovative 'quantum leaps' forward, with occasional unforeseen obstacles to be overcome (Covid). Many inspiring individual efforts are mentioned, and yet there is not enough room to include all the generous folks who worked alongside them to help us continually thrive, grow and (occasionally) recover.

We are a community marked not just by being curious lifelong learners, but also by our resiliency and our drive to continuously improve our learning and sharing experiences.

We have continued to enjoy U of A support over the years as we used the Education Building as the focal point for our Spring Sessions. Even after funding constraints required the university to take a cost-recovery approach, we still benefit from reduced rental rates. It's a partnership many of us value dearly as alumni.

Our legacy includes helping Edmonton become the first Canadian city in UNESCO's Global Network of Learning Cities. We continue to attract world-class course presenters, who often return because they enjoy the ELLA experience.

Our classes are diverse and vibrant. We modeled how to collaborate and create rewarding connections long before the terms 'abundance model' and 'community-based solutions' became popular.

Congratulations to our 25th Anniversary team on this excellent publication!

Expanding Minds, Enriching Lives



ELLA touches everyone who takes a course, teaches a course or volunteers to help out, in some profound ways. So what's the secret sauce? What about ELLA is so special and what does it mean to the many members who have taken its courses over the past quarter century?

Current Vice-president Vivian Mattia says, "ELLA offers purpose, intellectual challenge and the satisfaction of contributing to something worthwhile. For 25 years ELLA has persevered through budget challenges, a pandemic and system changes. Really, it is amazing that a volunteer organization has adapted and thrived this long. It is the people, the learners, the instructors, the volunteers who recruit and manage courses and the myriad details that go into offering two sessions per year, one online and one in person. It is connecting with friends year after year and catching up on what has happened since last year. It is having purpose in life, whether preparing for the next class or using lifelong skills to assist in sustaining the organization."

Liz McCord has been attending ELLA and volunteering for more than 15 years. "It's the opportunity to do just what you're interested in. It isn't a required course. You just have to listen. Another great thing about ELLA is that the instructors really enjoy having us as students because we are enthusiastic and ask questions and really become part of the class.... ELLA gives people what they want, flexibility, a wide diversity of courses and excellent instructors. And they thrive in the camaraderie, too."



"ELLA offers purpose, intellectual challenge and the satisfaction of contributing to something worthwhile"
- Vivian Mattia

"It's the opportunity to do just what you're interested in. It isn't a required course. You just have to listen."
- Liz McCord



"I am so grateful for ELLA and the many learning and social opportunities it has afforded me over these many years. It has truly made a huge difference in my life."
- Beverly Gummer

"Older people need stimulation," says Beverley Brown, who has been involved in ELLA since the very beginning. "And where do we get it? We do go to the library, but that's only half of it. I think it's the interaction with other people. It's the pull back and forth between the instructor and the students."

Beverly Gummer has attended every year of ELLA, except for one, since 2002. "Not only have I gained a great deal of knowledge from the many classes, but I have also met some amazing people and made many steadfast friends. I once even met a woman who had worked for CSIS. I am so grateful for ELLA and the many learning and social opportunities it has afforded me over these many years. It has truly made a huge difference in my life."

Ruth Collins-Nakai has volunteered her considerable knowledge and skills to ELLA for more than a decade, all the while attending a variety of classes. "ELLA is a safe space to be ignorant, to ask dumb questions. It is an inclusive environment where total opposites can be heard, inform and shape one's perspective; where people can become more objective based on learning. Whenever one meets new people, it expands one's mind if you are willing to listen to different, even opposite views."

New ELLA member Kim Ohman started taking ELLA courses even before retirement and was quickly fully engaged. "I had the absolute best time at that (first) spring session and made a couple of new friends. Subsequently, I told all of my co-workers about ELLA and planned to save vacation time to be able to attend again the following spring....One of my co-workers plans to come to her first session this spring, and I am so tickled to be able to see her experience not only the wonderfully vast array of classes but, just as importantly, the community that I now find myself in."

ELLA: A HISTORY OF RESILIENCE AND DETERMINATION



Beverley Brown

In 2001, the University of Alberta's Faculty of Extension was facing funding pressures and making tough decisions on what had to be cut. Courses for older adults, which had been running since 1976 under the name Spring Session for Seniors, were on the block. But nothing had been announced.

"It was kind of rumoured that they were going to drop the classes. We were thinking, 'We can't let that happen,'" says Beverley Brown, who was a devotee of the Extension program and still takes Edmonton Lifelong Learners Association online courses.

Soon word of the end of the Extension courses leaked out, apparently thanks to an overheard conversation in a washroom.



Pat Shields



Dennis Foth

An appeal, and petition, asking for the university to continue the classes failed to convince the decision makers. During a luncheon meeting at the Faculty Club, Dennis Foth, representing the Faculty of Extension, formally confirmed that the University of Alberta could no longer provide classes for seniors.

Dennis also commented that in his experience the programs for seniors which survive are the ones in which the participants take charge. Then he hinted that a partnership with the Faculty of Extension could be worked out if there was an organization of interested seniors keen on continuing the classes.

A small group of volunteers started plotting out a new way to offer courses, meeting at an Education Building coffee table, at Nellie's Tea House and eventually at St. Timothy's Anglican Church.

David Chinnery is credited with coming up with the idea to create a nonprofit society. The initial steering committee members were Marilyn Chinnery, Beverley Brown, Carol Goretzky, Frances Klinge, Valerie Cload, Pat Shields, Marg Stephens and Mildred Jowsey. Marilyn Chinnery became the society's first president.

One day Pat Shields set off to register the group as a nonprofit society, but when she got to the government agency she realized they didn't have a name for the new organization. "The woman taking our information suggested 'ELLA', short for 'Edmonton Lifelong Learners Association'. That was fantastic – perfect. So that's what we became, which pleased everyone." Marilyn Chinnery called a meeting for anyone interested in adult learning, says Pat. Contacts were made to participants of the former Spring Session for Seniors; phoning prospective participants was constant, and 20 guaranteed attendees were confirmed.

"A hundred people showed up! We couldn't believe it. That there were so many people committed to this type of learning was amazing," says Pat.

By the end of that summer, Edmonton Lifelong Learners Association had its official status as a nonprofit society -- and 65 paid-up members.

The new organization entered into an alliance with the U of A Faculty of Extension so courses could be continued in spring 2002. The university would provide all the classrooms and art studios, and other physical supplies. ELLA would find the students and instructors.

In that year ELLA gained its charitable status with the Canada Revenue Agency and soon ELLA attracted the patronage of Lieutenant Governor Lois Hole, a longtime proponent of lifelong learning, who spoke at the celebration of ELLA's first spring session. The lieutenant governor was given an honorary membership, a sweatshirt and gave many of her trademark hugs at the spring session celebration.

Finding a rhythm



Lois Pawl and Germaine Chau

In the early years volunteers worked at growing the organization, using tuition, membership fees, grants and donations to pay for instructors and managing the in-person class sessions. Mall tables were set up and board members spread the word about ELLA in media interviews and speaking engagements. The University of Alberta Endowment Fund supplied grants for ELLA that helped with bursaries, professional development and operational support.

Lois Pawl remembers the start of her volunteer journey in 2007 as a member of the Administration Committee. Among other things she handled telephone registrations. But the digital world was opening up. In 2006, the ELLA newsletter shifted over to being delivered by email and soon credit cards were accepted for registration.

The rising number of ELLA members resulted in a huge increase in the number of classes – from 20 to 40 in 2009, with topics from quantum physics to Shakespeare to writing classes, three art courses, tai chi and salsa dancing. Registration for Spring Session reached 255, and course fees were \$220, with a small extra fee for art classes.

The increasing number of classes was a challenge for the Program Committee which was alleviated by the formation of the Program Implementation Committee in 2011, with Germaine Chau, who had joined the organization in 2009, as its first chair. The work was far-ranging and still familiar today – assembling and printing of the course guide, processing registrations on a single computer, working with the Faculty of Extension to assign appropriate classrooms, handling instructor supply needs, training class hosts and creating student name tags that also listed their classes and room numbers.

Having seen a similar model elsewhere, Germaine recognized the value of an Ambassador Program for ELLA. She recruited Lois Pawl and Mary Anne King to lead this initiative. Ambassadors welcomed new members, counted heads for noon hour presentations and staffed the information desk. By 2010 the membership was 386, with 266 registering for courses.

At that time the board sought grants from the university for website redesign, training for maintenance of the membership database and publishing software support. In 2011 ELLA celebrated its tenth anniversary with cake and a keynote speech from master gardener Jim Hole, Lois Hole's son. The spring session also featured a packed series of noon hour events, including a presentation from Senator Tommy Banks titled "A Prairie Piano Player in Darkest Ottawa".



ELLA takes off in 2010



By the early 2010s membership began to take off. ELLA grew from 500 members in 2011 to about 800 in 2014, with 500 taking courses. Seeing the trend early on, 2011-president Nancy Rae said in her annual report "A challenge for future boards will be determining how to manage growth". And, indeed, spring courses in 2012 were capped at 425 registrants to match available classroom space.

ELLA volunteers logged 4,000 hours of work, according to 2012-president John Elliot's annual report.

In 2014, ELLA registration shifted over to Eventbrite's online site, following a policy decision by the Faculty of Extension to require all arm's length partners to use the platform. Volunteers John Chandler and Germaine Chau "spent much time streamlining this shift" to the new platform. John also worked on creating the my-ella.com website, along with Jim Macdonald.

ELLA continued to attract renowned instructors, including globe-trotting U of A paleontologist Dr. Philip Currie and Dr. Anne Fanning, preeminent tuberculosis researcher and recipient of the Canadian Medical Association's highest honour, the Frederic Newton Gisborne Starr Award.

ELLA's 15th anniversary in 2016 included a celebratory lunch at the Jubilee Auditorium, anniversary t-shirts and hoodies, and the publication of "A Brief History of ELLA", a booklet outlining the organization's history.

Joyce Madsen became president of ELLA that year. The organization was still growing, with more than 800 members, and still had a close relationship with the university, she says. "They did lots of the things that we now have to do ourselves. We would do the registrations, but the money would be handled by the U of A. They also looked after vetting all of our professors. We had office space in a (university) building, so they paid for that. The phone was the university's and so were the supplies... It was a great relationship that we had with the Faculty of Extension".

By 2018 ELLA was running at capacity, with more than 50 classes, and membership hit 950. "We had a club that went for walks at noon. And all new members got a red dot on their name tags and a table in the cafeteria was designated for long-timers to take turns to sit and chat with the 'red-dots'", says Joyce. Art classes were moved to Enterprise Square downtown, and volunteers were given green St. Patrick's Day hats to be conspicuous guides on the LRT, she adds.

Not every initiative worked well. For instance, the selling of shirts and hoodies taxed the limit of volunteers, Joyce suggests. "It was just a zoo. Someone came up to me the next year and said, "Can we do t-shirts again?" and I said, "Not until our memory fades!"

ELLA kept growing, and the association found innovative ways to adjust. The popular noon hour speaker series, for instance, was livestreamed into a second auditorium to accommodate everyone who wanted to attend.

Linda Riopelle became chair of the Administration Committee while Joyce was president. Further government cutbacks to advanced education began to be felt. "During this time we began to hear the first rumbling of change in our partnership with the University. There was talk of charging room rental for the use of classrooms, the gym and art space", Linda says.

Some of the classrooms in the Education Building were no longer available to ELLA, which prompted the art class shift to downtown. The board drew up goals in 2018: to broaden the awareness of ELLA within the community; to implement fundraising activities to supplement revenue; to recruit and retain the best volunteers and to continue to enhance and maintain the administration of ELLA.

In 2019 membership numbers topped 1,000. There were concerns about the implications of a new funding model at the university and how it would affect ELLA. But, generally, the association was firing on all cylinders, with record numbers and a committed board and volunteer base.

And then came 2020!



Joyce Madsen

Covid changes everything



Walter Archer



Shirley Forrest

"In 2020 we were all ready for registration day in early March. We had completed all the training for the volunteers, everything was set up and organized to process many manual registrations for classes, to answer emails and phone calls for members doing online registration, all from our office downtown", says Linda Riopelle. "Over 600 registrations for Spring Session were completed in about a week. Then the pandemic happened. We couldn't be on campus for in-person learning. All classes had to be cancelled and refunds issued".

Shirley Forrest was President in 2019-20. Thanks to the pandemic in 2020 ELLA lost a year of volunteer planning and work. "It was heartbreaking. Yet out of that disruption came transformation".

ELLA pivoted to online learning in the spring of 2020. Volunteers, instructors and students launched into learning Zoom. Information sessions were held for instructors. The board "reimagined how learning could happen. It wasn't easy – but it was necessary, and it worked", says Forrest.

Ruth Collins-Nakai started her volunteer work with ELLA on the science sub-committee of the Program Development Committee. Before the pandemic, a plan was in place for her to succeed Walter Archer as chair of the PDC.

Covid changed things! Walter and Ruth wanted to offer courses online as a partial replacement for the spring 2020 face-to-face session that had been cancelled.

The ELLA board anticipated one or two courses, but Ruth says they offered to do ten. Ruth, Walter and Diane Mirth formed the Online Learning Committee that worked with the instructors who had agreed to teach courses online, and seven courses became the pilot project that launched ELLA into online learning for older adults.

Since the technology was new to most instructors, to almost all learners and also to Ruth, Diane and, to some extent, Walter, there were the inevitable glitches and problems. But these were overcome, and the pilot project was judged to be a success. That pilot was then expanded to full online remote sessions.

A fall session in 2020 included 22 courses. In January 2021 ELLA launched 34 courses, with another 20 offered in the spring.

The online sessions worked well, but volunteers found running three sessions in 12 months exhausting so, in June 2021, the board decided to offer a winter session online and spring in-person, with no autumn courses, says Ruth. Perhaps not surprisingly, the membership slumped during Covid, dropping from 974 to 853 in 2021.

With the sudden technological jolt forward necessitated by Covid, a new website had to be created. The IT Committee tested the new website from October to November 2020 and the new my-ella.com website launched on December 1, 2020.

Post-pandemic pivot

In 2022 the in-person spring session returned but, due to its popularity, the winter online session continued and clearly had become a permanent feature of ELLA's course offerings. The online session offered 19 courses and the in-person had 33.

In the fall of 2022 ELLA suddenly faced a major organizational challenge. The Faculty of Extension became University of Alberta Continuing Education and in October the university announced it would not renew its longtime partnership agreement with ELLA. Despite the surprise separation, ELLA was able to rent the necessary space in the Education Building for the spring 2023 classes. Since then, the board has secured a rental agreement with the University to cover classes into 2029.

Shirley Zylstra says when ELLA moved from the University partnership things changed, with ELLA taking ownership of processing; invoicing; printing; finding and paying for instructors, technology and lecture rooms. The board hired Shirley as a paid bookkeeper for ELLA, an organization otherwise largely run by volunteers.

In 2022, the City of Edmonton became the first city in Canada to be accepted as a member of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities. ELLA was referenced for its role in lifelong learners for seniors in a key supporting document – City of Edmonton's Community Action Learning Plan 2021-2031 – which helped secure the UNESCO designation.

In 2023 the board decided to charge for courses differently, so rather than offering up to four courses for one set fee, registrants could opt for two-, three- or four-course bundles at different prices.



The ability to offer online courses opened up new possibilities in terms of both presenters and students. The winter 2024 online session included "After the Pandemic: What Have we Learned to Help us Deal with the Coming Crises", hosted by Dr. Anne Fanning. Speakers for the course included Dr. Lorne Tyrell, Dr. Lenora Saxinger, the Honourable Anne McLellan and Bob Rae, Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations at the time.

In 2025 a pilot program instituted recording of some online winter courses on a limited basis, so participants had access to missed classes. Noma Morrissey, a founding member of ELLA, says she enjoys the winter online courses, especially the ones that are recorded. "If you miss the time slot for the class you can watch it later. You can participate in the safety of your own home during inclement weather and you can watch at your leisure", says Noma.

Shirley Zylstra neatly sums up the history of ELLA: "ELLA is resilient. We survived and still do because people obviously want and love learning. ELLA could have disappeared many times, but we are flexible and driven to keep going."



Facing Change, Finding Opportunity



Change is inevitable and through 25 years ELLA has always been flexible enough to pivot and come out on top. The association's board and volunteers have continued to be resilient problem solvers.

Former president Nancy Rae believes that ELLA has "ongoing challenges" such as succession planning for Board members and continuity building throughout the organization. Research has shown that views of volunteering have changed in recent years, so efforts at recruitment and retention and providing meaningful positions need to be addressed. Utilizing specific skills of members will support the viability of Committees, but ensuring that records of past activities are maintained and passed along is essential.

Nancy also feels that maintaining the strong sense of community, which exists within ELLA, is important. The inclusion of online classes provides knowledge on a variety of topics and meets diverse needs of many members. However, the sense of community connections through social interaction is less. Seniors who have strong personal interactions maintain better health outcomes. ELLA needs to find ways of continuing in person sessions to maintain such social interaction and utilize steps to ensure it occurs, as well, in online situations.

Former president Lynne Mansell says ELLA has survived and thrived for 25 years and should continue for another 25. Up until 2022, ELLA had a partnership with the Faculty of Continuing Education at the University of Alberta with an agreement that included an office and space for ELLA to conduct spring sessions. In 2022, ELLA was informed that the University could not continue in the same way due to changes in structure as well as funding restrictions. The ELLA Board and members searched for suitable alternate space at other post secondary institutions and reached out to their contacts for support. Thanks to the Provost Office, ELLA was offered a three-year contract with the U of A Facilities to rent the needed space (the best option available). Although this was a transactional rental agreement with the price to increase over three years, ELLA made it work.

In 2025, another agreement was signed to take us through 2029. Revenue challenges will continue but ELLA will strive to keep course fees affordable (and offer bursaries) and will pursue fundraising and grant opportunities as much as possible, says Lynne. She declares that we now are "masters of our own destiny".

Longtime ELLA board member and volunteer Ruth Collins-Nakai believes "We need to continue adapting and trying new ideas to make ELLA attractive. ... The struggle for volunteers never stops, and we need to recruit leadership for all the committees." She suggests registrants who want to purchase recorded courses could be another revenue source. And recorded or online sessions could be contracted to other organizations such as SAGE and seniors' centres. "We could expand our online courses across other provinces."

25 Years of Learning and Leadership

2001

The Seed is planted

University of Alberta announces plans to stop providing extension classes for older adults. A small group of volunteers decides to create the Edmonton Lifelong Learners Association to fill the void.

2002

Green shoots

ELLA, in affiliation with the U of A Faculty of Extension, holds its first spring session of classes. The organization gets its charitable status.

2006–2010

Early growth

In 2009, 255 register for spring session and by 2010 registration rises to 266.

2011

10 years in

The 10th anniversary spring celebration features cake and master gardener Jim Hole as keynote speaker. Membership hits 500.

2012 – 2019

ELLA takes off

Membership mushrooms - 600 in 2012, 800 in 2014 and 1000 by 2019. By 2018 there are 50 courses offered.

2020–2021

Hardship spawns new course models

COVID 19 cancels in-person classes. ELLA begins to offer courses online. A full online session is offered January to April 2021.

2021

Online classes lead to innovative learning opportunities

Students and instructors can participate from anywhere.

2022–25

New opportunities and challenges

Online courses continue and in-person spring session returns. U of A announces end of partnership agreement with ELLA but the Board secures a rental agreement to cover classes into 2026.

2026 – Stepping into the future

ELLA celebrates its landmark 25 years of expanding the world of lifelong learners.

Lessons Learned

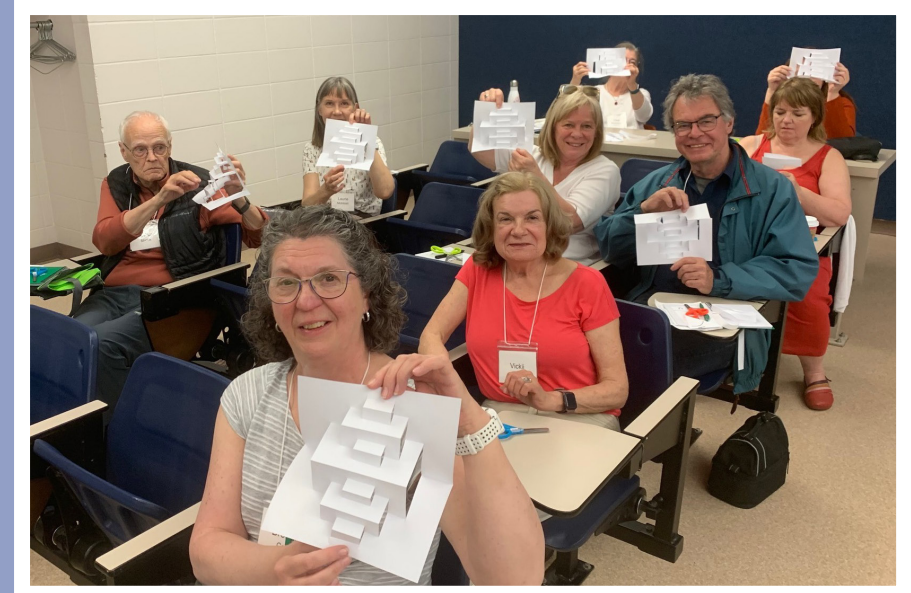
ELLA offers courses in arts and fine arts, humanities, science, and wellness. And those courses offer a world of wonders and have made significant differences in student lives. Every ELLA member has their favourites.



Julia Boberg, who has been taking ELLA courses from the very beginning, delights in exploring new topics – an engineering course surprised her with how fascinating it was to learn about the way bridges are constructed! Line dancing, art appreciation and Michael Roeder's beloved music classes have been favourites.

In the Birds of Alberta course taught by Geoff Holroyd, I learned about important conservation research, including studies at the Beaverhill Bird Observatory near Tofield. That class prompted my wife and I to attend a Saw Whet Owl fundraising event to watch the banding of owls to track their migratory patterns.

- Roger Bryan



Ernie Hodges says he has been impressed by the breadth of knowledge and experience of instructors such as European history expert Brent Bennett and music professor Michael Roeder. "I also particularly enjoyed a course on the North Saskatchewan watershed which focused on the farmers in this area and water needs from industry," says Ernie. "It was fantastic to learn about the local situation."



Carol Vaage's favourite course changed her life. In the Introduction to Drawing course, instructor Suzanne Lamoureux taught Carol freedom and how to access her creativity, opening up a whole new world. Now Carol is an artist. She has sold her work and has taught watercolour classes at her seniors' group.



Wendy Davis's foray into a writing class led to surprising new avenues of expression. Instructor Eunice Scarfe suggested class members keep their writing group together after ELLA.

"We finally met at her house. My colleagues liked my stories and encouraged me to get them published. Hence "Dal and Rice" was created and published by McGill Queens (publishing)".



Audra Jones likes the variety available. "Some courses I've taken just for interest's sake, like Forensic Anthropology (I'm certainly not planning to become an amateur crime investigator in my retirement!) But other courses have provided me with practical knowledge that I've been able to apply to my everyday life: learning to use my camera properly in Photography has been invaluable in my travels and closer to home. Marvels of Mathematics has provided me with all sorts of "mathemagic" tricks that I use when I tutor to make math more engaging."



Steve Chambers says it took a year or two to get used to taking courses outside his comfort zone, but now he would recommend attendees try a little exploring. "Some highlights for me include the study of jazz with Dr. Roeder, featuring a week each discussing Duke Ellington, Dave Brubeck and Chick Corea. Courses with Dr. Fanning on global health, pandemics and related subjects, with a stellar array of guest speakers from around the world, stands out. I pushed myself but thoroughly enjoyed an introduction to improv comedy. ...It's hard to pick favourites!"



Learning beyond the classroom



The U of A Education building isn't the only venue for ELLA learning. Over the years students have struck out for field trips and adventures outside the classroom.

The Beyond the Barn Door course for several sessions gave students an opportunity to explore the U of A's farm.

Students in Janet Sperling's 'Insects in Managed Ecosystems: the Good, the Bad and the Beautiful', ventured across campus to the U of A's entomology museum for close-up encounters with live insects.

Various instructors have squired their eager students to labs and classrooms, museums and the Art Gallery of Alberta.

Classes in wine appreciation were held at a venue outside the university altogether. And it's pretty tough to do a bird watching or photography course without getting outdoors.



Instructors love ELLA

ELLA attracts amazing instructors, many of whom come back year after year. These dedicated teachers, often with national and international accolades, say they appreciate the curiosity and engagement of lifelong learners.



David Wishart is a University of Alberta metabolomics researcher and professor who received the Gerhard Herzberg Canada Gold Medal for Science and Engineering, the most prestigious award in those fields, in 2025. And he finds teaching at ELLA a valuable experience. "It's a chance to teach people that are pretty much my own age and probably with similar experiences to me," says Professor Wishart.

"We often don't get a chance at university to create courses that pursue topics that are maybe a little outside our specified discipline. The normal process takes up to five years to get a course implemented. ELLA gives us the flexibility and opportunity to put together a course in less than six months.

"We have ... a class of like-minded individuals who are really keen to learn and not worried about grades or tests. ... Sometimes we devote almost the entire hour to just answering questions. I've been doing this about every two years for 10 years. I would happily do it for free — actually I don't know why they have to pay us."

Eminent public health and tuberculosis researcher and academic **Anne Fanning** says teaching and organizing a course is a wonderful opportunity to explore a topic that she thinks is critically important and then get feedback.

"I find the subjects fascinating and then getting gurus to talk about it is fabulous. The organizers of ELLA are generous with their time and ideas. They encouraged me to explore various things and that's worked well.

"There's flexibility with numbers attending and tremendous help setting up connections to various speakers in different parts of the world."



Music Professor Emeritus **Michael Roeder** taught the history of classical music and jazz at the University of Alberta for more than 30 years and received recognition for his teaching including the 3M Teaching Fellowship, a top Canadian award. He has taught at ELLA sessions for years and gets rave reviews from lifelong learners.

"I have a great respect for ELLA and all the volunteers... especially those who are truly involved with organizing ELLA and the ones who just help day to day. It's an amazing institution. The students are always attentive and enthusiastic, they ask good and interesting questions and just provide me with a really stimulating place to teach, to work and do what I really love."



Past-president of the Yoga Association of Alberta **Anita Sielecki** has been practicing yoga for more than 50 years and sees the special value of yoga for ELLA students.

"People in ELLA are so committed they really notice the advantage of doing yoga every day and taking care of their bodies.

"All of the research of the last few years indicate the importance of social interaction. As we age we start losing agency in some of the circles where we used to interact: perhaps work colleagues or younger friends are still busy with their own obligations.

"ELLA offers the possibility of a community of peers, people who can support our curiosity and have a desire to learn and understand new things and have the patience to support us with our limitations."



Retired The King's University professor **Brian Martin** wishes he could take regular university students along to ELLA classes.

The astrophysicist and science educator says they would see people bubbling with excitement, not on phones or sleeping.

Brian regards ELLA people as a "community of explorers - such an accomplished group of people engaged and excited about learning."

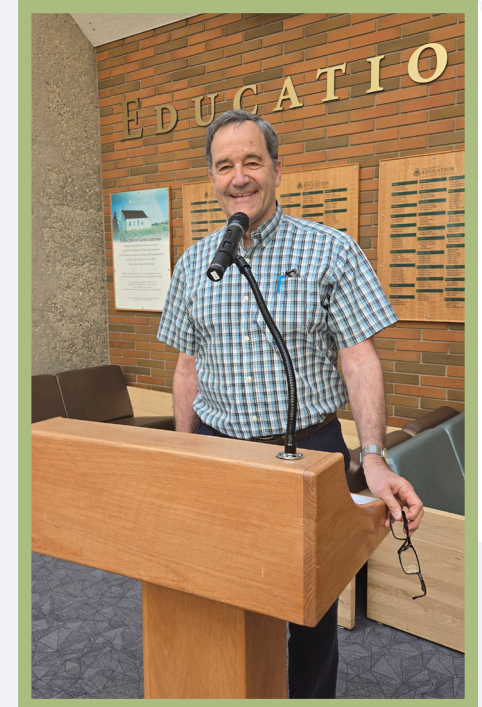


Volunteers make the world go 'round

No volunteers, no ELLA. The organization has, since its inception, been a labour of love for the hundreds and thousands of volunteers who pitched in and made it possible. With a diversity of talents and a talent for innovation, this core group has transformed ELLA into a world-class educational resource.



To the volunteers who make it all possible - thank you!



Fun and friendships



Life is better with friends and fun and both can be found at ELLA. How about a bit of inspired madness in an improv class, or a surprise line dance in the cafeteria? New and old friends meet each spring in Education Building hallways and classrooms and there's often a moment for online chatter before the beginning of online winter classes too.



Noma Morrissey's favorite class was art history. And this founding member of ELLA found some friends who were inspired by the same course. Six of them formed quite a bond and travelled together for 13 years to art museums throughout the United States and Canada.



Carol Vaage points out it's not just the classroom experience that builds friendships. "I think the passion of volunteering with other people is the very best way you can be involved in ELLA."

As a result of Carol's participation on the Board as a volunteer, she has new lifelong friends. "ELLA is a community of learning experience for older people, as you build a close relationship working together on a common goal."

"We are a community of like-minded people that love learning, questioning, exchanging information, who love spending time in classes, meeting new people, walking around campus, having lunch in the cafeteria.You may see these people only once a year but come together as old friends," says **Shirley Zylstra**.

Shirley Forrest says her standout memories of ELLA involve the feeling of belonging. Over the last decade she's taken close to 40 classes. Although she finds it difficult to choose a favourite course, she can say with certainty that "ELLA didn't just feed my curiosity; it introduced me to friendships that have lasted well beyond the classroom."

Governing ELLA is a learning adventure

The board, its structure, duties and sophistication all changed considerably over the years.

Pat Shields

Founding board member Pat sums up how rewarding the work of creating and growing ELLA has been for the dedicated volunteers.

“For me, ELLA was the highlight of my adult life; that we put this thing together and it was so successful. We actually got classes underway, got a lot of people coming to classes and today it’s still a thriving organization. That’s what I’m most proud of.”

Nancy Rae

Nancy Rae began her Board experience as Chair of Publicity and served as President from 2009-2011, a period of quickly rising membership. “There was such a sense of accomplishment when working together towards a goal by contributing to the organization and meeting the interests of ELLA members.”

Joyce Madsen

Joyce reports there were some rocky times at the beginning of her term as president in 2016 but board members and key volunteers provided the necessary continuity.

“Things started to come around, and we started to look at the future a bit more. It was a really interesting time, because from where I sit, it was a stabilizing time... We were being much more discerning and ensuring that we had people who would actually do the work.”

Ruth Collins-Nakai

At the end of the first session she attended, Ruth volunteered for the science sub-committee, part of the Program Development Committee, and eventually became the Chair of the PDC. She believes it is important to keep people engaged by moving into new position.

“It was a delight to make new friends and work with people such as Walter (Archer) and others who bring their strength, expertise and contacts. (They are the reason) why ELLA has been successful in recruiting volunteers who are both stimulated and engaged.”

Lynne Mansell

Lynne Mansell’s biggest challenge as president was the termination of the partnership agreement with the U of A. The board had to offer different options to continue the ELLA legacy, she says. “For future sustainability I think we need to provide the best volunteer experiences possible, attract new volunteers at all levels and continue to plan strategically.”

ELLA’s past predicts its future



As the co-ordinator of the 25th Anniversary Activities, I thought I had a good understanding of ELLA’s growth, spirit and transformation under surprising circumstances. However, after searching through boxes of archives, photos and reports and minutes, I became aware of the mountains climbed and waters forded in ELLA’s journey of 25 years. There are not many lifelong learning organizations in Canada that have survived budget cuts and changing priorities to celebrate 25 years of operating.

From the beginning in 2001 to 2026, ELLA has taken on challenges and made changes that transformed the organization. From the decision to become a non-profit organization, to quickly rising member numbers, to the necessity of extending the number of class offerings, to the pandemic and online classes, to a new relationship with the University of Alberta; ELLA’s Board have managed to reimagine how learning could work.

“ELLA runs on dedication, flexibility and a shared commitment to learning,” according to Shirley Forrest.

From the beginning, the group of determined, curious learners heard that successful lifelong learning programs were ones in which the participants took charge. And take charge, they did. ELLA was registered as a non profit society which developed into a partnership with the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta.

This partnership worked well and fit ELLA’s needs until 2022 when the University of Alberta decided not to renew the partnership due to structural changes and funding restrictions. This surprise decision rattled ELLA. But a transactional agreement was signed with U of A Facilities and ELLA has made it work. This year the agreement has been extended to 2029.

ELLA lost some advantages but also windows have opened for Lifelong Learners. ELLA has become an independent organization and as such can evolve in ways which fit the times. This opening up of options gives ELLA the opportunity to take control and “be masters of our own destiny.”

Will ELLA grow through the next 25 years? The odds are in the affirmative. The strength, determination and belief in lifelong learning has guided ELLA through 25 years and although the methods may change to meet members’ needs, decisions will be made internally. ELLA will be in charge.

Happy Anniversary ELLA. Welcome to a new era.

Fran Galbraith
25th Anniversary Committee Chair





EDMONTON
**lifelong
learners**
ASSOCIATION

25
2001-2026



ELLA's Mission

To offer mature adults high-quality and affordable non-credit educational courses, seminars and workshops which stimulate both mind and body. Topic areas may include liberal arts, fine arts, sciences, humanities, wellness and leisure.

ELLA's Vision

To inspire as many individuals as possible to discover the joys of lifelong learning and education.

This booklet was put together from interviews with many ELLA members. To see longer stories about their experiences with lifelong learning and more information about ELLA's 25th anniversary, please go to ELLA's website at my-ella.com.

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