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Chautauqua Institution

Lively exchange of ideas is cornerstone of wisdom

By Vada Snider

Learning is a sport at Chautauqua Institution.

For nine weeks each year, the ancient forest along Chautauqua Lake in western New York resounds with influential voices in politics, religion and the arts.

"This is one of the few places where porch and corner conversation revolves around the great issues of the day. There is a relaxed atmosphere of intense conversation," said Meg Viehe, a summer Chautauquan and winter resident of Newport Beach.

It all began in 1876, when Lewis Miller and John Heyl Vincent founded a center based on the concept that "the whole of life is a school."

"I am going to college! Never mind about 30 years, or 50, or 70," wrote Miller in his book "The Chautauqua Movement." "I want to improve all my talents. I have intellect. I intend to develop and enrich it. I must know more. I must love to know."

Throughout the years, Chautauqua Institution has stayed true to its original purpose. Today, learning at Chautauqua takes many forms. Lectures in the 5,500-seat Amphitheater and the Hall of Philosophy. Symphony concerts. Yoga lessons. Courses in self-improvement.

Each of the 142,000 persons who visit Chautauqua in a summer discovers a unique avenue to growth.

Kids enjoy it.

For children who grow up at Chautauqua, whether for a week or the entire season, life is full of opportunity.

"I've spent every summer of my life at Chautauqua, and the older you get the more you realize this place is so different from any other place," said 17-year-old Elizabeth Curry. "The whole experience of being here is a learning process — going to Boys' and Girls' Club, watching the ballet, taking sailing lessons, hearing the symphony."

Kit Trepasso, director of the Chautauqua Children's School, encourages his teachers to do everything they can to spark children's interest in learning.

“We help children tune into the different possibilities that exist at Chautauqua — the art, the music, the library,” Trepasso said. “We go up to the practice huts and listen to the musicians. And presenters from around the grounds come here to share their interests and skills. We encourage the children’s enthusiasm and help them learn what is available to enjoy throughout the rest of their lives.”

Jared Jacobsen, director of music at the First Lutheran Church in San Diego, spent his childhood summers at Chautauqua and now serves as official organist for Chautauqua Institution.

“Most of the platelets in my blood came from Chautauqua,” he said. “Everything that I do now is colored by the fact that I grew up here. Many people have an interesting view of the world, but it’s basically on one channel. I grew up with cable. Just by walking around the grounds, you can flip all the channels you want. You’re bound to come across something you ordinarily wouldn’t see.

“You might be walking past the amphitheater on your way to a lecture, but the symphony is rehearsing a Strauss waltz and you stop to listen. Then you think, I like this guy Strauss, so you go to the library and discover there’s more than one Strauss. And it just blooms from there.”

Multidimensional learning

Indeed, it is this atmosphere of multidimensional learning that makes Chautauqua so unique.

“Chautauqua is an idea, embracing the ‘all things’ of life — art, science, society, religion, patriotism, education — whatsoever tends to enlarge, refine and ennoble the individual,” said co-founder John Heyl Vincent.

Enlarge. Refine. Ennoble. “It is still our mission to provide that sort of environment,” said Jack Voelker, director of special studies. “We’re opening people’s eyes and minds to ideas, whether it’s through courses or the lecture platform. Chautauqua strives to challenge you through a variety of means to engage in thinking about subjects that you perhaps haven’t thought about before.”

Courses are the route to growth that Betsy Allen chooses. For each of the past five years, she has combed the special studies catalog before selecting her Chautauqua week.

“I want to learn to do something I’ve never tried before,” she explained. “I’m a librarian, so I certainly believe in learning from books, but there’s nothing better than learning things by trying them out. This is a wonderful way to get away and concentrate on something new.

“It’s OK to be a beginner because you’re usually there with other people who are in the same boat, and everyone is there to learn.”

She has already explored courses in art, music, sailing, jewelry-making and self-improvement. But Allen is far from running out of interesting studies.

“I went through the catalog this morning and found 27 more classes I want to take. I guess I’ll be coming back to Chautauqua for a long time.”

Allen is not alone in her enthusiasm for the special-studies offerings.

“There seems to be a voracious appetite in the area of enrichment courses — the pure love of learning,” said Voelker. “We’re pressed to really provide an exciting curriculum.”

Each year, 50 to 70 new courses are added to the several hundred offered. Voelker uses a process of “thoughtful intuition” in selecting new classes.

“We have an excellent group of faculty and people proposing courses,” he explained. “It really boils down to the subjective, trying to create a sense of balance in the offerings.”

Classes in personal/professional development and health/fitness are particularly popular. But dozens of courses reached maximum enrollment this summer, including French, philosophy, watercolor and storytelling.

Themed lectures

Each year, thousands of Chautauqua vacationers choose to enrich their lives through the experiential approach offered by special studies. But others prefer the intellectual stimulation of platform lectures.

Morning lectures in the amphitheater are presented by internationally recognized speakers from many walks of life. Each week’s presentations are focused around a theme. Afternoon lectures, presented by the Department of Religion, address the same theme from a religious or philosophical perspective.

Theme weeks planned for the 1998 season include “Ethics: Teaching Virtue, Educating for Character,” “An Introduction to Islam: Its Religions and Societies” and “The Promise and Threat of Biotechnology.”

A critical element at any Chautauqua lecture is the question-and-answer session following the address. It is this lively interchange of ideas that is the cornerstone of learning at Chautauqua.

“I will ask questions about everything, and of everybody, till I find out what I want to know,” wrote co-founder Miller.

Thus, even in the amphitheater, surrounded by 3,000 or more fellow students, learning is an active process.

“I always take notes at the lectures,” said Wendle Taggart. “Coming to Chautauqua stimulates your thinking. It challenges you, and you get into some self-examination as a result.

“Taggart and his wife began visiting Chautauqua when he retired 24 years ago. They have come for a week each year since then, renting a room at the Baptist House and taking an active interest in everything on the program.

“We went to the doctor for physicals just before we came up here this year, and he told us that we are the youngest 87-year-olds he’s ever seen,” Taggart said.

Although a weeklong Chautauqua visit cannot be given full credit for keeping the Taggarts young, many Chautauquans would agree that an annual trek to the Institution rejuvenates.

Why so many return

“Even for folks who come back only for a weekend, or a week or two, it is a very meaningful return,” said Voelker. “It’s something that centers their year.”

Just why that return is so meaningful is an interesting topic for speculation.

“One would say that he was coming to attend a certain lecture; another, to take a certain course; and yet a third, to listen to music, or to visit friends,” David Morton wrote in *The Chautauquan Daily* in 1952. “But these various answers are readily reducible to a common denominator — to terms in which their inner secret lives are lived. They come, indeed, in response to one of the oldest impulses that we know: man’s instinct to return, again and yet again, to that which is the presence and the source of the best that he has known.”

There is something about Chautauqua that creates an atmosphere of higher purpose. Something that draws out the best from each visitor.

“There is an ambience about Chautauqua, sort of a spiritual quality,” said historian Alfreda Irwin.

Others describing Chautauqua speak of soul, authenticity, community, a sense of belonging.

“You don’t manufacture a soul,” said Voelker. “You have to find it by living through a period of time. Chautauqua certainly began with a clear mission, but its soul has evolved over the past 120 years.”

Although programming is important, Chautauqua is still able to create a sense of community and nurture human relationships. It’s what kids love about Boys’ and Girls’ Club and Children’s School. They love making friends and having long-term connections.

“Even with people coming and going, there is a sense of community here,” said Voelker. “Being in a group at Club, singing in the choir, taking a special-studies course, sitting in the same place at the amphitheater concerts. These experiences all encourage this engaging of one person with another.”

A stroll down the brick walk from the amphitheater to the Hall of Philosophy is a friendly experience. People speak to each other, neighbor to neighbor. Centuries-old maple trees tower above well-maintained gardens and homes.

Perhaps President Theodore Roosevelt said it best when he addressed the Chautauqua Assembly in 1905 as “a gathering that is typically American in that it is typical of America at its best.”

Meredith Hudson’s grandfather bought his house at No. 10 Bliss in Chautauqua only five years after Roosevelt’s address. When he questioned the real estate agent about how safe it was on the grounds, the agent replied, “Is heaven safe?”

Today, Hudson’s grandchildren are sixth-generation Chautauquans, and in many ways the place is still as their great-great-grandfather found it.

“It changes, and you know it changes with the times,” Hudson said. “Yet you always come back and it’s comfortable. It’s what you’ve always remembered.”

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