

SOAR Featured Faculty: An Interview with Sharon O'Brien, MA

Today's interview subject is Sharon O'Brien MA, a former faculty member at Siena Heights University and SOAR's originator. In March, SOAR Board member Barbara Spreitzer-Berent invited Ms. O'Brien to share her thoughts about SOAR's past, present and future.

Question: You were the founder of SOAR and the chairperson of its first Board. You also are a member of the SOAR faculty. Can you tell us how it all began?

Back in 2000, I was an Assistant Dean at Wayne State University working with off-campus sites and programs. My work led me to membership in the Michigan Association of Adult and Continuing Education (MAACE) and the Association for Continuing Higher Education (ACHE). Both organizations were increasingly enthusiastic about a new outreach concept for colleges and universities: learning-in-retirement institutes. After attending a national ACHE conference, where representatives of the Elderhostel organization presented the learning-in-retirement concept, I couldn't wait to propose it to my colleagues at WSU. It took a while, but the new Dean of Wayne's College of Lifelong Learning in 2002 lent her support to the idea. The university has been wonderfully supportive of the program ever since.

We convened a committee of interested parties at Wayne that year to meet the start-up requirements and milestones established by Elderhostel for its affiliated lifelong learning programs. By fall 2003, we were ready to launch SOAR --- with no money, 22 classes, and a small team of enthusiastic faculty members and volunteers. A press release about our inaugural open house was picked-up by the *Detroit Free Press* and, to our surprise, 300 people arrived on our opening day. That response validated our belief that many people in metro Detroit are committed to lifelong learning and an active retirement.

I was a member of our first faculty, and I became the chair of SOAR's first Board of Directors. I retained the chairperson role for 10 years and I continue to teach today. SOAR is still affiliated with both Wayne State University and the Elderhostel program, now known as Road Scholar.

Question: What have been your proudest accomplishments as founder and first chairperson of SOAR?

I'm so happy when classes begin each term! The gratified look on the faces of our members after classes, their smiles, their sense of doing something worthwhile --- that is tremendously rewarding for me. People have told me that they found a lifeline in SOAR. What could be more positive than that?

I'm also very proud of the award that SOAR received from ACHE in 2012 for the "best non-credit university program". I had the chance to speak at their national conference and to share our accomplishments. Ten years earlier, I was in the audience for a presentation much like that one. It was thrilling to realize that our efforts had come full circle and we were now the example of success for other university communities.

I'm also very thankful for all the individuals and institutions who have contributed to SOAR's progress over the years. We would be nothing without the generosity of Wayne State University, the dedication of our faculty, the time and talents of our volunteers, and the engagement of our members.

Question: SOAR is a great resource for active retirees. What do you feel is the secret to a successful retirement?

Mental and emotional fuel. As much physical, mental and social activity as one can handle. Continued development of both emotional and intellectual intelligence. SOAR provides opportunities for people to be engaged in learning no matter what their age or stage in life.

Question: You teach literature and film classes for SOAR. What topics are among your favorites? What are some of your goals as an instructor?

I love to have a good conversation with students in my classes about the books we've read or the films we've seen. I like to get below the surface of a book or film, explore its meaning, consider how it applies to us.

I've taught classes in literature from various eras, and women's studies. Personally, I have two favorite genres. The first is literature of the 1920s --- authors like Fitzgerald and Hemingway, and those of the Harlem Renaissance. The second is detective and spy novels, especially works by Louise Penny, Henning Mankel and Agatha Christie. I've just discovered John LeCarre and I'm devouring his works.

Question: Were you always interested in literature?

Actually, no. I was not a reader as a child. I grew up in a golfing household, and I was very involved in golf and tennis in my early years. Fortunately, a wonderful high school teacher introduced me to Shakespeare and to writing; I developed a love for both. And then an uncle of mine, who was a college professor, suggested I read *Green Mansions*. We discussed it by letter....and explored many more books together after that. They were two wonderful influences....By the way, I generally prefer the feel and experience of reading a book to reading on a e-reader. But I will use a Kindle for convenience sometimes.

Question: What are your favorite classes at SOAR?

I tend to gravitate towards humanities subjects like film, literature, music and art. Brian Murphy is one of my favorite faculty members at SOAR. I'm starting to branch-out a bit, and I've particularly enjoyed the work of new faculty member Stephen Steinhardt.

Question: In addition to your faculty and leadership roles at SOAR, you also chair the Special Events Committee. What are your favorite events?

I'm a big fan of bee-bop jazz. So the Steinway Jazz Café events we've sponsored have been my favorites.

Question: What changes have you seen at SOAR in recent years?

SOAR has significantly expanded its offerings since its inception in 2003, particularly in the area of field trips, special events and the winter program. These opportunities have grown out of the demands of our members and continue to be very successful.

Our faculty has also grown substantially. At first, faculty recruitment was a little difficult because people didn't automatically understand our mission or our audience. But after teaching a class at SOAR, instructors realize that our members are educated, informed and engaged --- in many cases, much more enthusiastic than undergraduate students! For that reason, we have many veteran instructors who return year after year, and we readily attract new speakers each term.

SOAR has also become more business savvy in the past few years, largely due to the leadership of our Executive Director Ralph Stromberg. SOAR now has 501c3 status as a non-profit organization. We've entered the digital age with our webpage and online registration system. Our budget is balanced and we have new streams of income. We're establishing partnerships with other educational institutions, like SOAR Macomb. SOAR is well-positioned for the future.

Question: Talking about the future, what are your visions for the future of the organization?

In my role on the board, I'm fortunate to have an opportunity to influence the future of SOAR. There are three areas that remain important to me.

First, our emphasis on academic courses --- in history, art, literature, law, science --- has always been important to our success. So I hope we always maintain that core focus even as we explore new topics and speakers.

Second, I'd like to see us forge more partnerships. We're working with other universities to expand our reach. We can also work with organizations like the Michigan Humanities Council and Road Scholar to enhance our offerings.

Third, I'd like our membership and faculty to reflect more of a rainbow, drawing upon the diverse population in metropolitan Detroit. Using technology, we might even be

able to reach people with disabilities or mobility issues who are homebound. Work on that project is already underway and I hope it succeeds.

Question: What message would you like to share with SOAR members?

Here are a few thoughts....I'd like to thank everyone who has been supportive of SOAR over the years, especially Wayne State University. I also urge members to continue to spread the word about the benefits of SOAR. Word-of-mouth advertising has always been our most important form of outreach. In addition, I'd like to share how much I appreciate the praise I've received from our members. Of course, clear, patient, constructive criticism about ways the organization can improve is also welcome. Finally, I encourage our members to join committees and to take-on leadership roles at SOAR. We do have a small staff to keep us focused and organized. But volunteers will continue to be the engine of our success.

Sharon O'Brien was born and raised in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She earned a BA in English and Spanish at Western Michigan University, and an MA in English at Wayne State University. She was working for the Small Business Development Corporation (SBDC) when she was invited by the President of Siena Heights University to join the faculty. She spent twenty years there teaching English and General Studies courses. She also served as Assistant Dean for off-campus programs at Wayne State University, overseeing programs and facilities throughout metropolitan Detroit. She opened the WSU Oakland Center and served as its first Director.

Sharon is also an avid fan of ballroom and latin dancing, and has competed and performed as a dancer in numerous venues.

March 2017