

# THE SACRAMENTO BEE

LOCAL

## Sacramento-area college brings knowledge, and some laughter, to senior facility

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Joan Griffin, an instructor at Sierra College, explains the significance of Martha Washington to a group of residents at Sonrisa Senior Living in Roseville on July 18. Griffin teaches under the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, an organization that offers classes to Sonrisa residents every month.

Seventeen students sat at desks in a dimly lit room last Friday and laughed as instructor Joan Griffin joked about the advantages of being a widow in Revolution-era America. Griffin was a quarter of the way through a two-hour lecture on the contributions of the first three First Ladies to their husbands' political successes.

The course was neither graded nor for credit. It also did not take place in a university. Griffin's students were all seniors — not the college kind, but residents at Sonrisa Senior Living in Roseville.



Since April, Sierra College in Rocklin has brought monthly classes to residents at Sonrisa Senior Living. The community college is one of 125 institutions nationwide partnered with the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute to deliver courses to anyone aged “50 years or better.”

Most of the time, seniors must head out of their residencies and to the classes on their own. But Sonrisa has decided to flip the script. Here, the campus comes to the community.

“The charter for a community college says you need to serve the whole community,” said Griffin, 71. “Birth to death.”

## **Taking care of the mind**

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Trent Whittington, 83, has attended all three OLLI classes at Sonrisa. He laughed the most during Griffin’s class and spoke fondly of the previous courses.

“OLLI’s one of the best programs,” he said.

Whittington had previously taught sculpture at Tennessee Tech’s Appalachian Center for Craft. Sonrisa’s partnership with OLLI allows residents to relive that classroom setting without having to buy a membership, as is typical. It also means the senior living community does not have to arrange transportation.

Campus executive director Carol Pickard, who has worked in the senior living industry for almost 30 years, notes that most senior living facilities tend to focus on residents’ physical health.

“We have physical therapy and speech therapy and occupational therapy, but that’s taking care of the body,” she said. “How else do we engage and enhance that? Well, we take care of the mind.”

Residents clearly enjoyed the lecture, asking Griffin questions and laughing at her quips. Griffin had spent 25 years as a middle school teacher before retiring. Missing the classroom, she joined Sierra College under OLLI in 2016 and began her “First Ladies” lecture series.



“A lot of people have a rough time when they first retire because they don’t know what to do with themselves,” Griffin said, citing her own retirement as an example. “It’s really lovely to have these kinds of classes where you can continue to learn and you keep your mind sharp.”



The sun sets over Sonrisa Senior Living’s independent living building in July 2023. Since April 2025, the senior living community has partnered with Sierra College and Osher Lifelong Learning Foundation to bring college-style courses to senior residents.

## Engaging residents

As Griffin notes, OLLI courses serve more than just intellectual needs.

After the class ended, Whittington made a beeline for 86-year-old Doris Serpa. The two of them had arrived at Sonrisa on the same day last year and became fast friends, often joking that they “moved in together.”

“You get to have a sense of belonging here right away,” Serpa said. “You don’t feel left out at all — there’s always something going on.”

Pickard recalls arranging for residents to go ziplining or sightseeing in Tahoe. It’s costly, she said. Independent living at Sonrisa starts at [almost \\$4,300 a month](#). During that time frame, Pickard spends tens of thousands of dollars on food alone



and pays a property tax of more than \$50,000.

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Whittington will teach his own class on sculpting and furniture-making in the near future — not with OLLI, he added with a laugh, but through Sonrisa's Watermark University program. Residents, staff and notable figures in the area are invited to host lessons on any topic of expertise. In 2023, Sonrisa's executive chef and future “Hell's Kitchen” contestant Anthony Vo led several culinary classes for residents.

As the OLLI classes continue, Whittington hopes to see more residents directing events. He and Serpa recall arranging and advertising small activities, such as funky hat days and writing cards to a worker soon to leave. But they hope to do bigger events.

“What (Sonrisa is) doing is great,” Whittington said. “But they're running this old people classroom because we're just sitting back and not doing it for ourselves.”

He noted that it was a fellow resident who suggested OLLI come to Sonrisa, and pointed to the ensuing “cooperation between the residents and the management” as a good start.

“They try to take care of our needs,” Serpa said, “if we let it be known.”