

COLLEGE FOR SENIORS

Now in its fifth year, the Master The Possibilities classes at On Top Of The World are going stronger than ever, thanks to President Ken Colen's bold vision of how seniors want to spend their retirement years, a phase of life that's constantly being redefined. At this iconic retirement community, it's happening one class at a time.

By Dean Blinkhorn • Photos By Steve Floethe



photo courtesy On Top Of The World

Senior communities have long had activity centers, places where the residents can gather, play golf, swim, or lounge in the clubhouse. The idea that those same folks could have a dynamic, vibrant, almost collegiate-like learning environment, however, is not as common. In fact, it's been almost non-existent.

But for On Top Of The World residents—and anyone else interested from outside the gates, so to speak—a whole lotta learnin' has been going on!

Now in its fifth year, the Master The Possibilities classes at Circle Square Commons have gone from 3,000 first-year enrollments to more than 16,000 in 2010. The quarterly classes have proved so popular, in fact, that Director of Education Dan Dowd (pictured left) has expanded the faculty to include local experts, instructors from CF and UF, and community retirees. The common thread is that they all have a passion for learning and a desire to teach someone else.

To celebrate this important milestone, I sat down with Ken Colen and Dan Dowd on a break from the community's semesters. It was quiet as we strolled through the usually bustling classrooms, but we had no trouble at all discussing many different topics in this exclusive 30-minute interview with *Ocala's Good Life* magazine. Here are the best parts of that free-wheeling conversation.

Ken, you're obviously here because you had a vision for this collegiate-type setting. Are you proud of what Master The Possibilities has achieved so far?

KEN: It's really been a progression. We have a long lineage in this business with my fa-

ther [founder Sidney Colen] who created the first modern condominium, an outgrowth of looking at his own parents and realizing that there weren't really a lot of good housing alternatives to seniors.

But the post-work years—you can't really call it "retirement"—are pretty busy here. What was missing was an educational component. Sure, we had all the pieces, but it wasn't assembled in a coherent, directed manner. That's where the breakthrough with MTP has come.

Yeah, we're very proud, but there's a lot more to do.

Dan, how long have you been involved?

DAN: Five years, even before we had this building. For a retirement community to take on something like this is quite remarkable. Since we're not associated with a traditional college or university, this is all our own. We create it fresh with each catalog—about 50 percent is new each time—and the ideas mostly come from the students themselves.

We can come up with a class, find a teacher, have it written up, and put it out there in a matter of hours. This is an ideal situation. They're curious, they want to learn, and they want to explore.

What's the average resident's day like?

KEN: Is there such a thing as an average OTOW resident? [laughs] All the communities are busy with social organizations, learning, golf, fitness—that's a really big component for most people—and volunteering in the greater community. A lot of volunteer hours come out of here.

How do you counter the stereotype of retirement as all-day shuffleboard?

KEN: Well, we have that, too. [laughs] But the reality is much different.

DAN: This is not your parents' or grandparents' retirement, and it never will be. "Retirement" is an inappropriate word.

KEN: To be fair, a lot of people keep working, albeit on a consulting or part-time basis, and it's changed how we've built and wired our homes. They're now very Internet-friendly because people want to stay connected.

The Baby Boomers are now starting to retire. What kind of lifestyle are they going to want? Will it look something like this?

DAN: CNN and *Money* magazine just did a report and they found out that what they want more than anything is education. This has become a huge draw.

What's the most unique class you've ever offered?

DAN: I think of all the guest speakers we've had—the director of Kensington Palace, the director of the Colin Powell Institute [Center for Policy Studies], ex-

perts on Yeats, a photographer from *The New York Times*.

When I first came here, I quickly discovered that if you want an expert, you don't have to go much further than walking the street. The nice thing is that they want to share that knowledge with others.

We make use of everything that we possibly can. We have a film series, a close relationship with the University of Florida's extension services, all kinds of things.

KEN: The archeology program is pretty unique. Many people move to Florida and want to know more about where they live. It started out as a Florida history class, then morphed into archeology, and now we're going back some 14,000 years.

What does the class actually get to do?

DAN: Well, they're involved with a dig right here. The first day, they found a Newnan point [a spear point or knife], and so we had evidence that this is just one of a succession of communities that has lived and flourished right here for thousands of years. It's a *really* popular class, so I guess there's a little Indiana Jones in all of us. [laughs]

KEN: One of the most amazing days I've ever spent around here was when we were reviewing some of the finds and we found a couple of homesteads that were dated to the 1850s, based on the type of stove that was found. The lecture that afternoon was on the run up to the Civil War and here we had just made this awesome discovery. This adds a real depth to the community.

We've been talking a lot about colleges, so let's mention our personal experiences. I went to the University of Florida, but where did you all go?

KEN: My degree is from the University of Rhode Island, but I have a lot of credits from Clemson University as well. Most everything else has been learned afterwards at the "school of hard knocks." [laughs]

DAN: I went to a small college in Syracuse called Le Moyne College and then I ended up teaching there and doing my graduate work at the Maxwell School [of Syracuse University]. But we were always told what we *needed* to learn; we were never asked what we *wanted* to learn. That's why this is so different.

Anything else you want to bring into the discussion?

KEN: No, I think we covered everything.

DAN: I just want to make sure that everyone knows that these classes are open to the public—and that we'll do anything we can to make this experience an exciting one. ✨

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Go to ontopoftheworld.com and click on the "amenities" tab for the MTP link or call 854-3600.



Top Left & Bottom Right: Now in its fifth year, the Master The Possibilities classes at Circle Square Commons have gone from 3,000 first-year enrollments to more than 16,000 in 2010. Art is a popular subject of study and here are just a few of the students' works-in-progress.

Top Right: The archeology program performs a dig which has uncovered artifacts dating back thousands of years.