

The Long Distance Learner: Senior Scholar Spotlight on May DuBois

Interview conducted by Erin Der-Mcleod



There are a multitude of surprises when it comes to retired teacher May DuBois. When she was teaching, her students were always shocked when they found out that she is a marathon runner. At seventy-one years of age, she has run over 150 marathons since her first L.A. Marathon in 1985. In fact, she has run the L.A. Marathon every year since its inception, making her one of 137 “Legacy Runners,” of which only 22 are women. Running has taken her to almost every state in the country and throughout the globe. This past summer, she traveled to Africa for the first time to run the Kilimanjaro Marathon.

Born and raised in Hong Kong, May’s first passion was playing the piano. She began at age two, and cited her prestigious Russian piano teacher as the person who most influenced her as a child. Though an excellent student at an academically rigorous Catholic school in Hong Kong, she did not enjoy studying because it took time away from practicing the piano. Her family moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania when she was twelve years old. Living in Pennsylvania, she enjoyed being in the same region as great conservatories like Julliard and Carnegie Hall. As a teenager, she enrolled in the Duquesne University Conservatory in Pittsburgh. When she was seventeen, her family moved to Los Angeles, and she earned a full scholarship to study classical piano at USC.

Though she always wanted to be a pianist, fate intervened when a friend got sick and asked her to substitute teach for her elementary school class. She began a career in teaching, and taught music at Los Angeles City College and West L.A. College until her retirement in 2013. At West L.A. College, she started an honors program to help motivated students transfer to prestigious universities, such as UCLA. With her many talents, May explains that her proudest accomplishment has been being a mother to her two sons, a computer scientist and a doctor.

Aside from inspiring her students, running, and music, May also has a passion for French culture, art and architecture. She goes to Paris every year, and has previously studied at the Sorbonne. The Senior Scholars Program has been an opportunity for her to further explore her passions and curiosities. Not surprisingly, she exercises not only her mind, but also her body, by taking public transit and walking to the UCLA campus. A true embodiment of quality longevity, we asked May DuBois about her experience as a Senior Scholar.

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How did you hear about the senior scholars program?

When I retired in 2013, a colleague involved with UCLA provided me with information on Senior Scholars.

What motivated you to become a senior scholar?

I have seen colleagues who retire and don't know what to do. I tried a class in Fall of 2013 after retiring, and have been taking classes ever since.

What has the experience been like for you?

Senior Scholars helps me stay sharp because it provides the unique opportunity to learn from the best professors. I have recommended this program to friends. I am very grateful and appreciative of the program and the professors who have had me in their classes.

How do you find the interaction with the students?

Interaction with the younger students has been nice. I sit next to them and speak to them. They have some great ideas and they help me with using technology.

Going back to school must give you a different take on learning. How does senior scholars differ from your experience in education earlier in your life?

The difference from being an undergraduate studies is that with Senior Scholars, you are studying something you love, out of your own desire and passion and not to achieve some future goal. You are not studying to get a job or to get good grades. When getting a degree, there were certain required courses that you had to take. This experience is unique and invaluable.

What course(s) have you taken?

I have taken 17 courses, mostly in French philosophy and literature.

What has been your favorite course?

I don't have a favorite course because each professor is unique, but I have really enjoyed learning about French philosophy and literature.

What does longevity mean to you?

Longevity means living a fruitful and long life and still being able to contribute to society. Helping other people is the best contribution you can make. It doesn't take much – just smiling or saying a nice word to someone.

