A quiet revolution took place in spring of 2012 on the campus of Cal State Channel Islands. A group of senior citizens taking part in the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, or OLLI, a nationwide organization for people over 50 who want to continue learning at a collegiate level—without grades or homework—suddenly realized they had more control over their organization than they had thought.

Dubbing it the “OLLI Spring,” the group took steps to wrest control of the purse strings and management from university administration, as written in the OLLI bylaws. “The university has been very good to us,” said Jack Phillips, 73, the president of the OLLI steering committee at Cal State Channel Islands. “But we were told that the program wasn’t making enough money and that there would have to be changes in tuition.” Phillips said a number of the students in the program had backgrounds in accounting and finance, and asked to see the numbers.

“It turns out that university accounting and administration is pretty complex; it wasn’t an easy process,” said Phillips. “Bernard Osher was the one who founded this thing, and in the original grant, what he said was that the institute needed to have college or university level courses for people who are 50 or better. They’re to require no homework, no grades or credits. It’s to be for the sheer love of learning. And then he said, ‘How you do it is up to you folks.’”

In the OLLI Spring, the group organized into a cadre of committees including curriculum and professors, marketing and outreach, and finance. They took control and now have a thriving, successful organization dedicated to lifelong learning.

“We have wonderful courses,” said Phillips. “You name it, we have it. We just did a course on Nietzsche, and we’ve done courses on computer programming and logic. We have courses on the cosmos and on Shakespeare, all kinds of things.” One of the professors in the group has been monitoring the return of flora and fauna to the hills surrounding Cal State Channel Islands since the Camarillo Springs fire. “All of us in the OLLI group were getting email updates, and we love it. It’s fascinating.”
Phillips said professors from all over Ventura County come to teach eight-week courses: one day a week for about two hours per class. “We’ve discovered that these professors like teaching us,” he said. “They tell us what they like is a whole classroom full of eager eyes; everyone who comes there wants to be there. There’s not a bunch of students looking at their cell phones or staring out the window.”

Phillips said one of his favorite courses so far was on Icelandic Sagas. “These are the very first novels, and this incredible culture is so wonderful—and even funny. But apparently, you don’t tell an Icelander that it’s funny,” he said.

“The OSHER program wanted students to run it,” said Jerry Clifford, a professor of chemistry at Cal State Channel Islands who teaches an OLLI course every year. “They do a great job, and it is the most fun thing I do. The students are motivated and enthusiastic, and they’re doing it for fun. They really are interested in learning.”

Clifford said OSHER attracts people who have an inherent curiosity about the world. “The OLLI group has spawned things like book clubs and various gatherings. These folks are engaged, and it’s such a joy.”

According to Clifford, one of the best things about OSHER classes is the social aspect. “Whenever we get back together, it’s like watching kindergartners after the summer,” he said. “They’re so excited to see each other. One of the things we always do is have a wine and cheese party. They like to be with each other, and they have a lot in common in their intellectual pursuits and their curiosity.”

OLLI: THE OSHER LIFELONG LEARNING INSTITUTE
Courses are typically offered on the campus of California State University Channel Islands in Camarillo. For those unable to attend day courses or travel to Camarillo, OLLI offers a number of day and evening courses at other venues in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties.

Details online at ext.csuci.edu/community-ed/isher/ or by calling 805.437.2748.