

Hostel teaches grandparents, donors

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"Hillsdale College" and "summer getaway" may not seem like compatible ideas, but in June and July, about 200 people from across the nation will gather on campus for the Summer 2010 Hillsdale Hostel.

Based off the model of "elder hostels," Hillsdale Hostel hosts grandparents of students, Imprimis subscribers, donors and friends of the college, providing lodging in the Dow Leadership Center and meals through Saga, Inc., as they relive the college experience.

Sandi J. Henry, director of the Hillsdale Hostel, said it all began in 1990 with the first hostel topic: "What is America?"

"Then we did two, then three, and it started expanding from there," she said.

Twenty-one years later, Hillsdale will have hosted a 74 hostels, including the following six offered for summer 2010: "The American Constitution," "What is America?," "Ancient Roots of Western Civilization," "Free Market Economics," "The Great Conversation in Western Literature" and "Islam and the West."

The hostels follow a structured format of lectures occurring in a series with short breaks in between, very much like the average students' class schedule.

"You can walk in late or come early, but the classes will start on time and end on time," Henry said.

Each hostel has four "bona fide" lecturers, all Hillsdale professors, which Henry said is one difference from other campuses hostels that usually invite guest speakers.

"Our program is a little unique in that way," she said.

Henry mentioned that one participant of a past hostel said, compared to the 95 hostels they've attended, Hillsdale, "has a lot of meat and potatoes here."

Al McNutt, grandfather of Hillsdale senior Natalie Kruser, and his wife, Loyce McNutt, has attended the "Ancient Roots of Western Civilization" and "Islam and the West" lectures. This summer, they'll make "Free Market Economics" their third, but it will not be their last, he said.

"I happen to be of the mind, that you can never know too much," Al McNutt said.

I felt like [the professors] lectured us, just as they would in a normal classroom," he added.

McNutt said he was particularly impressed with the "Islam and the West" lecture since the professors provided a lot of insight into the religion, history, and politics, helping the audience get a better grasp on why Islam is such a major factor in world turmoil.

"The stuff we've taken teaches us why we're here today," he said.

He hopes to get the same thing out of the "Free Market" lecture.

Henry said she's inspired by the participants and their never-ending hunger to learn.

"By Wednesday, they've had eight lectures and they're tired, but they're ready for Thursday," she said.

Professor of Religion Don Westblade lectured in his first hostel at Hillsdale in 1997 and has been with the program 14 years. This summer, he'll speak on "Judaism and Christianity" in "Ancient Roots" and the "Religion on Islam" in the Islam series. Westblade actually suggested the idea of lecturing on Islam for one hostel, but concern for controversy came up.

"There was concern there might be more heat than light in it," Westblade said.

In 2008, the first lecture was offered, and since then, the hostel has received a good response.

Westblade said it's easy to stereotype Muslims as the extreme militants the news portrays them as, so the lectures present the other factors.

"We're trying to show people the larger context of Islam," Westblade said.

He said his lecture is refreshed every year since Islam's standing in the world changes every year, and to offer something new and different for returners.

Even with the expansion and some repetition of topics, Henry treats every hostel as if it's the first.

"I'm just as enthused today as I was 21 years ago," she said.