

SENIORS GO GLOBAL

PLYMOUTH HARBOR UNDERWRITES SUCCESSFUL SIMULCAST OF GLOBAL LECTURE SERIES

By Sue Cullen

The Sarasota Institute of Lifetime Learning (SILL), in collaboration with Plymouth Harbor on Sarasota Bay, stepped into the digital age with this season's popular Thursday morning global issues lecture series.

For the first time, SILL offered its 12 weekly January through March lectures via simulcast from The Player's Theatre to residents of the Plymouth Harbor and Sarasota Bay Club retirement communities. The simulcast helped make the program accessible to residents who have difficulty getting out and about as well as to those who preferred the convenience of viewing lectures onsite. Plymouth Harbor underwrote the cost of the telecast by Access Sarasota, Comcast public access channel 19.

The pilot program was so well received that SILL plans to offer the same opportunity next season to other senior residences from Tampa to Naples, according to Ed Schmith, SILL's director of marketing and a member of the nonprofit's board of directors.

The program also was very successful from Plymouth Harbor's perspective. "It went really well," said Gordon Okawa, Plymouth Harbor's director of community relations. "We had about 100 participants, which nearly sold out our theatre." Okawa said subscribers could choose to go to The Players Theatre or view the program at Plymouth Harbor. A follow-up survey drew responses from 70 participants, and all of them said they would like the simulcast to continue next year, he said.

Sarasota Bay Club, which participated in the pilot program in March, had a similar upbeat response from residents, according to Jill Ross, director of arts and leisure. "We have a highly educated group here, and they were interested in the subject matter," Ross said. "They did a really great job, and the response here was very positive. It is getting a little harder for some to get out, and the fact that this was more accessible to them was important." She said about 80 people attended the telecasts, and Sarasota Bay Club plans to participate again next year.

The concept of simulcasting the lectures evolved from a meeting between SILL and Plymouth Harbor in February 2008, according to Okawa. SILL explored technological options and found that Access Sarasota was interested in producing the simulcast. Plymouth Harbor agreed to underwrite the cost. "The 2009 season was a test to see if we could do it from a technological standpoint, and although we had a couple of glitches, it is clear that we can," Schmith said. "Phase II in 2010 will answer the question of whether we can market this successfully to other senior communities. I believe we have something of great value to offer them."

Plymouth Harbor has an historic connection with SILL. Dr. Evelyn Duvall, an early resident, founded the nonprofit in 1972, and current resident Dr. Margaret Bates, who serves as an adjunct member of SILL's board, helped bring the two organizations together to create the simulcast. 