Here we are, back where we started. Or are we?

As the past year of COVID began, many of us thought we were going to have to wait out the pandemic and return to normal when it was over. However, once the initial cleanup from a canceled term was done, we realized that waiting was not an option. We invested in technology and ways to deliver MOLLI courses, events, and course materials. We implemented health protocols made by national, state, local, university, and Osher Foundation levels to guide us through our next steps. Combatting quarantine isolation was our goal, but how?

The first step was selecting Zoom for the online delivery of course and events. Teri and Sierra set to work learning all they could about Zoom. Trainings were scheduled for MOLLI students, instructors, and presenters. Each training provided additional expertise for Teri and Sierra and confidence for the MOLLI participants. Then the MOLLI instructor, Cassandra Hemphill, came along and threw the Zoom door wide open. Cassandra already had experience teaching over Zoom and had excellent information to share. Teri and Sierra soaked up every bit of knowledge Cassandra provided. They practiced, researched, and went above and beyond to help MOLLI members with their individual devices. MOLLI was back up and running.

A possibility and a challenge joined together pushing MOLLI towards another a second change. Members had for many years been asking about the possibility of recording courses and events for viewing later. The possibility could now be a reality, but this raised the issue of storage. Where could we store large files securely, affordably, and be accessible? A platform entitled, ShareFile, provided all of that capacity and more.

Admittedly, a change to course registration was in the works before the pandemic. Demand for space-limited courses was increasing and waitlists were growing. The way MOLLI members registered for courses was going to need to be a third change due to the risk of COVID. MOLLI members could not come to the office to register, nor could they volunteer to help with registration. The time was right for instituting an allocation system. In addition, members were given the ability to log into their registration account, review their receipt, and pay any outstanding balance.

One last change was needed to develop a personal connection to others in MOLLI. MOLLInsights, this newsletter, emerged. Not focused on courses and events, but on the people and MOLLI behind the scenes. We hope you enjoy reading about the MOLLI instructors and members. Please consider providing your own story when contacted for an interview. If you have written a poem or short story and would like to have it in the newsletter, please email it to molli@umontana.edu. Finally, an exciting volunteer opportunity exists to assist with the newsletter so if interested, please call or email the MOLLI office.

As we closeout the year, we realize - we are not back where we started. 2021-2022 MOLLI continues as a COVID-tested differentiated model still with high-quality courses and events and engaging volunteer opportunities. Thank you for your continued support of MOLLI!
The first time Christopher Comer taught for MOLLI, I wondered: is he Christopher Comer, the neuroscientist and Dean of the UM College of Humanities and Sciences, or is he the informal signature of “Chris” directly above his formal name and title. What I discovered is – well you decide.

Chris’s way of speaking and communicating immediately struck me. When he is speaking, he seems to take a moment to review and consider his response from all angles. His written communications are direct and to the point. Suddenly, he starts to tell a story. When there is the ever so slight change in his speech pattern, you lean in to hear more. Your brain follows along in an almost liltting, musical pattern. MOLLI students used the words “knowledgeable,” “engaging,” “enthusiastic,” and “fascinating” to describe him and his course.

Prior to interviewing Chris, I had the privilege of working with him on a MOLLI committee. His mindset seems to be “no task too menial or project too big. We are here to work and make a difference.” As some of you may already realize, he is the force behind MOLLInSights.

Now, let’s examine what I discovered during our interview. Chris’s roots are deep and strong. All four of his grandparents were born in Ireland. He never had the opportunity to know his paternal grandparents. But, his connection with his maternal grandparents, especially his grandfather, was strong. His favorite childhood memories revolved around the times he and his grandfather spent drawing. His grandfather attended The Cooper Union in New York. The architectural plan he drafted for his final project is Chris’s most prized possession. Chris fondly remembers his grandfather taking him to buildings in New York to see the fancy plasterwork his grandfather had created.

Chris was born in Newark, New Jersey. His father had strong ties in the Newark area, as well as Ireland. Chris received his love of literature from his father. Chris’s mother instilled in him the ability to be honest and forthright. She is now 101 and living in a senior living facility in New Jersey.

Encouraged to choose their own paths, Chris and his siblings each attended a different high school. When it came time to make a decision on post high school life, Chris was faced with choosing between literature, psychology, or biology. In the end, he headed to local St. Peter’s College where he earned a bachelor’s in biology. He pursued a graduate degree at the University of Chicago, where he originally thought he might study primate behavior in the wild. A chance meeting with Prof. Paul Grobstein led Chris to become a neuroscientist. Chris traded in African primates for frog brains in Chicago.

After a postdoc at Cornell, Chris became a faculty member at the University of Illinois, Chicago (UIC). At UIC, Chris helped found and directed their neuroscience center. He worked his way up through the ranks and became the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. After three years as Dean, he returned to research. When the Dean of Humanities and Sciences opened at the University of Montana, Chris’s spouse and a friend encouraged him to apply. After ten years as Dean, Chris decided it was time to pursue other areas of interest, such as finish writing a book.

Interestingly, while Chris was pursuing his career, something more important was happening behind the scenes. He was and continues to be a dad. Without hesitation, Chris will tell you his greatest accomplishment is his children. He is a proud father and grandfather.

Chris is his favorite season, as it represents the energy and excitement of “back to school.”

What is Chris looking at doing in the next chapter of his life? Travel, of course, and he would like to become fluent in other languages. He has started experimenting and trying out new things - cooking and mixology. He wants to put his talent and desire to work building “things.” He fondly remembers the best part of setting up a lab was building the equipment.

As I close, I want to highlight Chris’s recent bucket list accomplishment. Brain, Mind, and the Narrative Imagination co-authored by Chris and Ashley Taggart. Their book demonstrates how literature taps into deep structures of memory and emotion that lie at the heart of our humanity. With this book, Chris found a way to combine two of his greatest interests, humanities and the sciences. It will be of interest to students and readers of all sorts, who enjoy both the humanities and the sciences. I hope his book is as successful as his combination of Christopher Comer and “Chris.”

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MOLLI
“Short Read”
A Touching Memory
By Dave Scott

During the summer of 1987 my dad, who had been diagnosed with throat cancer, came to Bend for his final visit. He had been given six months to live, and he wanted to see Calvin before he passed. We had given Calvin my dad’s name Robert as his middle name in honor of my dad. Grandpa Bob wanted to see Calvin Robert, or Bobbie as my dad called him. They had a great visit. Grandpa was so proud of Bobbie.

Late one night on that visit my dad and I sat at the kitchen table drinking beer and talking. I knew that my dad would not live much longer, and I wanted to pass on some thoughts to him.

“Dad, you instilled morals in me and Rick [my brother] which will stay with us forever. You taught us never to lie or steal,” I told him. “I think those lessons stuck with both of us.”

I am so glad I got a final chance to thank him for the lessons he taught us.

He looked at me and said, “Thank you so much, Dave, for that kindness.”

He died that fall.

In retrospect the fact that Dad was terminally ill brought out the desire in me to share those final thoughts. I think it is a testament to all of us to not wait to share special thoughts with our loved ones in the living years, as we never know when the end will come.

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MOLLI members, do you have a short writing or poem you would like included in MOLLInSights? Send it to:
molli@umontana.edu

Grandpa Bob with Bobbie (Calvin) in Bend in the summer of 1987
Myrt’s nomadic life reminds me of the Hank Snow song, “I’ve Been Everywhere, Man.” As you read her travels below, hum along:

Lafayette, IN; Atlanta, GA; Bethesda, MD; Evanston, IL; Los Angeles, CA; Boston, MA; Princeton, NJ; South Korea; Evanston, IL; Alexandria, VA; Swarthmore, PA; Thailand; MISSOULA, MONTANA!

Myrt says the influence of her Canadian mother and living her first 10 years in the segregated south "made me who I am—a little British, a little southern, a little nomad.” Myrt’s travels started in Lafayette, Indiana where her father was a math professor at Purdue. He moved his family to Atlanta to teach at Emory University for ten years. When he decided to leave university life they left the south moving to Bethesda, Maryland in the Washington, DC area and then to Evanston, Illinois in the Chicago area, and finally to Santa Monica CA while engaging in various research projects using math. Myrt graduated from Occidental College in Los Angeles, married Larry and then her travel escalated.

At Boston University she earned her Master’s degree in education. She taught in public middle schools for three years, the last in Princeton NJ. Next they went to Seoul South Korea where she taught English conversation to college women and had their first daughter--a memorable year with her daughter born in a military hospital there. Back to Princeton and then to Evanston again. Larry left academics and worked at the World Bank for 11 years living in Alexandria, VA. During that time they continued trips to Korea, had a second daughter and enjoyed many hours of family time in the free museums on the Capital Mall. Finally, they settled down in Pennsylvania for thirty years, where Larry taught economics and Myrt oversaw the student life section of Swarthmore College.

With this background, Myrt Westphal certainly never expected to live in Montana. Like many of our friends of a certain age, she came here because her daughter and family had come here first. In addition, Missoula could provide the services needed for Myrt’s disabled husband.

You might find Myrt on the tennis court beating the opposition with her daughter as partner. Or playing bridge; improving her watercolor skills; learning about Montana; or reading her way through the works of Ivan Doig.

Myrt had to learn early in life to adapt to new environments, new friends, new cultures and how to enter an established community. People who have lived in a community for a long time have a personal cadre of friends and an entrenched social life. Sometimes they don’t want to meet new people. Myrt says you have to put yourself out there which can be really hard in a new location. Here in Missoula, playing tennis with her daughter opened a door. At the library she is in a book group and a painting group meeting avid readers and painters—some are in the 50 Books a Year club. She ran into others, new to life here like herself. Their “Newcomers Granny Group” learned Missoula together. Taking at least 15 MOLLI classes brought her in touch with like-minded individuals. And, she brought her sister, Vicky Clark, to visit and teach three plus MOLLI classes.

Myrt finds inspiration in nature, hearing peoples’ stories and her involvement in art. “Artists make great leaders because they see the world in a creative way and have learned to make uncountable decisions. Writers invite you into their lives and share their knowledge.”

Myrt’s home in Missoula has Montana’s inspiring natural world in full view. Myrt, the nomad, has become Myrt, the Missoulian.