It’s a Monday afternoon, and the professor stands in front of a room filled mostly with senior adults, each of whom has been given a playing card. It’s the group’s first meeting, and the room is buzzing. The professor holds up a hand to get their attention; it’s clear he has something important to say. "Does everyone know how to play rock/paper/scissors?"

Thus begins a game of "Survive or Die," the first of several interactive activities in a class on political violence run by University at Albany political science professor Victor Asal. Participants are smiling as they mill about, flashing hand signals and opting to challenge whoever they can for a chance at winning more cards. A few, however, are avoiding the mock conflict altogether. When the game ends, Asal sums up its lesson. "Most of you went around and challenged," he says. "If you hadn’t, all of you would’ve won. Why challenge, if everyone can win?" Then on the screen behind him appears some heady thought about the topic, a quote about the inherent warlike quality of humanity from 17th-century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes.

More Information

About Humanities Institute for Lifelong Learning (HILL)
HILL offers two semesters of classes each year, all of which are open to Capital Region residents at a cost of $35 each. A spring sampler offering a preview of several subjects is currently under way; the fall 2016 semester will begin in September. For more information, visit bethlehemschools.org/community/adult-education.

Dave McMullan of Delmar, a student in the political violence class who has been coming to HILL for several years, is impressed by Asal's engaging approach; so, too, is student RoseAnn Fogarty of Delmar, a retired teacher. "This is good teaching," she says. "He's really making demands of us. That's much better education than simply feeding a bunch of information."

HILL is the brainchild of the late Helen Adler, who worked as an English teacher at Bethlehem High School. Adler and her husband, Fred, founded the program in 1993, aiming to provide a more substantive continuing education option to town residents. Now open to all who live in the Capital Region, HILL has grown from a few classes with a small group of students to serving well over a thousand people a year.

A volunteer committee, made up mostly of retirees and chaired by Bruce Bushart of Delmar, keeps HILL running. Bushart first got involved with the program as a student; it was Helen Adler who recruited him to join the committee.

"They were very driven people," Bushart says of the Adlers, both of whom died around a decade ago. "They were some of the victims of McCarthyism," he says, "so they had an enormous sensitivity to the value of free speech and lifelong learning."

Just as the Adlers did when HILL began, the committee takes a very proactive approach...
to course programming, which includes scanning through college course catalogs for topics of interest and auditing classes before inviting professors to teach. HILL classes are held on weekdays and are primarily attended by retirees, who pay $35 for a six-week class. "For $35 you get the best of a college course," says student Patricia Zima, of Slingerlands. "It's so invigorating, and the people here are so well-read."

Not all the classes at HILL are as interactive as the political violence class, but Asal sees his approach as integral to the material. "It's one thing for you to read about somebody making a horrific decision because they think it's the best thing for their country. ... It's very different when you're put in a position — albeit totally simulated — where you have to make the decision," he says. "I find that students tend to think about those decisions in a much more meaningful way."

There are no papers, tests or grades in HILL classes, but that doesn't stop Asal from holding out an important course goal. "I want (students) to come away with a better understanding of the factors that have been argued to explain political violence, and to arrive at their own conclusions," he says. "And I want them to have fun."

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