An Emeritus Center at the University at Albany is an idea that had been discussed for more than a decade before the Center was actually created. In a letter dated December 14, 1999, Professor Bill Reese (Philosophy) summarized his own efforts: “I have been concerned with this project for quite a number of years, and have shepherded two documents with this concern through the relevant university committees and councils. [Both were approved] by the Executive Committee of the University Senate, and recommended to President Patrick Swigert. President Karen Hitchcock has also expressed her support.”

Six years later, persistent lobbying by Reese finally paid off: On December 10, 2005, President Kermit Hall announced the creation of the Emeritus Center during a reception for Emeriti and Professionals. Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs William Hedberg became the Center’s “mentor,” and Sidney Decker became “University Liaison.” President Hall provided a space—a former mail room—in the University Administration Building on Western Avenue, and a modest budget. On November 1, 2006, Officer-in-Charge and Provost Susan Herbst presided over the Grand Opening of the Emeritus Center, sadly without the presence of President Hall, who had died in a swimming accident on August 13. A plaque in grateful memory of President Hall was placed on the Center’s wall.

Early on, Founding President Bill Reese gathered an executive Board of emeriti, and on March 30, 2007, the first By-laws were approved by the Board. High among the goals of the Center is recognition of the achievements of Emeriti in retirement. The By-laws includes the following sentence: “To encourage Emeriti to continue research, teaching, and university services, with a strong sense of community.” As an example, “Emeritus Center Research Fellows” are recognized for their post-retirement publications, which are proudly displayed on the Center’s bookshelves.

In July 2008, the Center and the University at Albany Office of Institutional Research launched a wide-ranging online survey to determine how Emeriti felt about the Center, and how to make our activities even more relevant to them. Among the findings: 71% of the Emeriti who responded live in the Capital District all or most of the year; 77% of them were interested in attending our lectures and/or entertainment events; and 70% were interested in receiving emails telling them what their fellow Emeriti were up to.

Also in 2008, the Emeritus Center established ties with the SUNY Retiree Service Corps (RSC). The Center sent representatives to the 2009 and 2011 SUNY retiree conferences sponsored by the RSC. This gave us opportunities to network with retirees from other SUNY campuses and, at the 2009 conference, Bill Reese had a chance to speak about the Emeritus Center during a panel discussion on how to start a campus-based retiree organization.

In the same year the Center became high-tech with a digital camcorder, with which we videotape most of our events. We then transfer them to DVDs that we make available, upon request, to the 200 or so Emeriti with whom we are constantly in touch through email. Subsequently we acquired more equipment: a large television set, a projector and a sound system—enhancements to our varied programs.

As for the Center’s teaching mission, the room which the University at Albany provided to us has become a venue for numerous activities, to which Emeriti, the University at large and the general public are all invited.

Our “Conversation Series” began as soon as the Center opened and has continued to the present. The Series involves a broad range of speakers who give short talks and then engage in question-and-answer sessions with the audience. There are five or six such meetings a semester covering a large range of topics, from biology, mathematics, and technology to visual arts, literature, poetry, theater and film.

Our forthcoming Fall 2012 Program might be one of the most exciting ever. It includes conversations with Casey Seiler on Capitol Confidential; Bertand Faye on Tennessee Williams; Eric Block on The Sense of Smell; Bruce Miroff on Prognosticating the Elections of 2012; Iliana Semmler on The Magic of Old Time Radio, and Joseph Levinger on Nuclear Energy, Nuclear Weapons.

Also, several members of the Emeritus Center Board have organized exciting “Creative Series.” For example, Grayce Burian (Theatre) planned and directed single drama presentations and a Series on American Drama. Iliana Semmler (English) and Ray Ortali (French) created three ambitious Series on opera: Opera 101-Discussing and Exploring Opera; Bel Canto Opera; and An Exploration of French Opera, Melodie and Chanson Populaire, from Debussy to Piaf. And almost every semester, Ortali offers a Film Series, often focusing on a single film director (Truffaut, Bunuel). The first of the Series, called Hollywood on the Hudson, was held at the Spectrum Theater in Albany.

This fall, our “Creative Series” is The Artist and Society-Patching the Quilt of Time through Cross-Cultural Multimedium Dialogue, presented by Mahmood Karimi Hakak, a poet, author, translator and film artist who has created 50 stage and screen productions in the U.S., Europe and his native Iran.
Many of the past events have been too popular to fit in the small (30 by 20 foot) Emeritus Center space. The Management Services Center in our building has kindly provided space for some of the events.

On the other hand, small groups also regularly use the UAlbany Emeritus Center. For example, Bill Reese organized a philosophy discussion group, and Iliana Semmler started a memoir writing group which continues to this day.

Remember the earlier quote from our By-laws?: “To encourage Emeriti to continue research, teaching, and university services, with a strong sense of community.” We must have done something right in that direction since Susan Phillips, UAlbany Provost, has recently posted on the professional social network LinkedIn, for the whole world to see, the following comment, addressed to all of us at the Emeritus Center: “[You have] been an inspirational force in creating a true community in the University at Albany Emeritus Center.” To which we have responded: “Thank you, Susan! And we don’t plan to stop there!”