

life@ELON

Spring 2026 – Tuesday Schedule

Morning Class: 10:00 – 12:00 and Afternoon Class: 1:30 – 3:30

February 10, 2026

Cuba's Epidemic of Blindness: How Yankees Solved Castro's Medical Mystery

M. Bruce Shields, M.D.

In the early 1990s, Cuba faced a baffling outbreak of sudden blindness that struck tens of thousands of people. Was it a new disease, a nutritional crisis, or something more sinister? Dr. M. Bruce Shields takes us inside the fascinating story of how American physicians were invited by the Castro government to investigate this medical mystery. Discover how science, collaboration, and a bit of detective work helped uncover the cause of Cuba's epidemic and what this episode reveals about medicine, politics, and human resilience. Join us as we welcome Bruce Shields back to LIFE@Elon to share the story behind his latest book, *Cuba's Epidemic of Blindness: How Yankees Solved Castro's Medical Mystery*.

***Dr. M. Bruce Shields** is Professor Emeritus of Ophthalmology and Visual Science at Yale School of Medicine, having served previously as Chair of the Department. He earned his medical degree at the University of Oklahoma, completed ophthalmology residency at Duke University, and did a glaucoma fellowship at Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary. Prior to Yale, he spent over two decades directing the Glaucoma Service at Duke University. Over his career, Dr. Shields has published extensively (including more than 200 scientific articles and book chapters) and authored or co-authored multiple books, with his Textbook of Glaucoma widely used in the field. He also holds a patent for a glaucoma surgical device. Even in retirement, he remains active in teaching, volunteer eye care, and writing.*

February 17, 2026

North Carolina's Changing Climate

Walter (Walt) Robinson, Ph.D.

North Carolina enjoys a (mostly) pleasant climate, but our climate is changing as Earth warms. This talk will place North Carolina in the global context of Earth's climate system. We will explore why our weather and climate are the way they are and how and why they are changing. The growing risks from extreme weather events will be addressed, along with what we, as citizens of North Carolina and the globe, should do about climate change.

***Walt Robinson** is a professor of Atmospheric Sciences at North Carolina State University. He holds B.S. and M.S. degrees in Physics from the University of Pennsylvania, and a Ph.D. in Geological Sciences from Columbia University. His research and teaching address the dynamics of Earth's atmosphere and climate, including the impacts of climate change. Robinson co-directs North Carolina State University's graduate program in Climate Change and Society, and he is a Fellow of the American Meteorological Society. In 2020 he was one of several co-authors of the North Carolina Climate Science Report mandated by then Governor Cooper.*

February 24, 2026

The Roots of Modern Sport in the Culture of Greece and Rome

Linda Danford

Join us to explore the origins of competitive sport in antiquity as well as the many parallels between ancient and modern athletics, including professionalism, hero-worship, fanatic spectators, expensive venue construction, gambling, and cheating. Say goodbye to the amateur ideal!

Linda Danford was born and raised in New Jersey. She took her undergraduate degree in Classics at Smith College and her graduate degree in Classical Literature and Philology from Yale University. She has lived in Greensboro with her husband and family since 1976. Before retiring in 2011, Linda taught for 22 years in the Classical Studies Department of UNC Greensboro where her specialties were Latin Pedagogy and Women in the Ancient Greek and Roman world. She created courses on various aspects of Roman daily life, entertainment, sports, religion, and in particular the health and legal status of women. Since retirement, she has been active in the Shepherd's Center of Greensboro and served for three years as the president of the Shepherd's Center Board from 2019 to 2022.

March 3, 2026

Not of This Earth: What we can see of our planet, our solar system, our galaxy, and the universe from space

David Brown

Not of This Earth takes participants on a stunning visual journey through our universe—from breathtaking satellite and International Space Station views of Earth to vivid images of our sun, planets, comets, and other celestial neighbors captured by telescopes and space probes. We will explore wonders within our own Milky Way, including nebulae, star clusters, exoplanets, and even the black hole at our galaxy's center, using imagery from Hubble, Spitzer, and the James Webb Space Telescope. The session concludes with awe-inspiring glimpses of distant galaxies of all sizes and shapes, each containing trillions of stars, offering a humbling perspective on our place in the cosmos.

David Dwight Brown was born in upstate New York and moved with his family to cities in New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania growing up. He came to North Carolina to attend North Carolina State University in Raleigh from 1965 to 1969, majoring in political science. Upon graduation, David chose to enlist in the US Navy, where his foreign language aptitude sent him to learn Arabic for a year. He served the remainder of his Navy time at the US Embassy in Nicosia, Cyprus, without having once set foot on a ship. Returning to the Greensboro area, David worked with two property and casualty insurance companies while attending UNC-Greensboro to get an MBA. After starting an insurance software company that was bought out after 10 years, David worked for Laboratory Corporation of America (LabCorp) at the headquarters in Burlington, eventually becoming the senior HR systems analyst for corporate management for over 18 years before retiring in 2015.

Why space? David has an abiding love of all things outer space. He is a big fan of science fiction, which often has turned into science fact, and follows the missions of NASA and other international space agencies as they seek to explore and understand our place in the universe.

March 10, 2026

Are We Alone? The search for extraterrestrial life

Mark Kelly

Learn about astronomy's biggest question: are we alone in the universe? In this class, we will explore the scientific search for life beyond Earth, from the possibility of microbial life in the outer solar system to the likelihood of civilizations in the galaxy. If there is life in our home galaxy, what could it look like? We will finish by discussing the enormous consequences of discovering an alien civilization and the societal impact of First Contact.

Mark William Kelly is an astronomy lecturer, an award-winning science fiction novelist, and a LIFE@Elon member. He studied at the Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia and performed research at NOAO Kitt Peak on cataclysmic variable stars. He is the author of several books, including the Lost in The Multiverse series and a short story anthology, 20,000 Leagues Remembered. After graduating from the U.S. Naval Academy, he served as a nuclear engineer on submarines. Following his naval service, he spent over two decades teaching college physics and astronomy. His last faculty position was at Arapahoe College, where he was named instructor of the year in 2021. He lives in Elon, North Carolina, and enjoys tai chi, bike riding, and writing.

March 17, 2026

One Wild & Precious Life: The Writings of Mary Oliver

Kathleen Fisher

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” Millions of people have found solace and inspiration in what is, perhaps, the most famous line Mary Oliver (1935-2019) ever wrote. A prolific poet and essayist, her writings about nature and the world have made her one of America's most beloved poets. As a child, she would often skip school to wander in the woods and hide out to read Walt Whitman or Nathaniel Hawthorne; nature and books became her most inspiring “teachers.” She would eventually write thirty-three collections of poetry, two books of essays, two poetry handbooks, and win a Pulitzer Prize. She never imagined that, for many, her poems would become almost holy text.

In this session, we will explore the experiences and people that made Oliver's own life “wild and precious”: nature, favorite authors, her beloved partner, Molly Malone Cook, and her irrepressible dog Percy. We will also read and discuss some of her poems together. If you have a favorite Mary Oliver poem, please feel free to bring and share it in our conversation.

Kathleen Fisher taught Religious Studies and Theology for twenty-one years at Assumption University in Massachusetts before retiring to Chapel Hill in 2023. She also taught at Boston

University where she received her Ph.D. in Medieval History and Religion. In Spring 2024, she made her first presentation for LIFE@Elon on the Book of Kells.

Long a fan of Mary Oliver, Kathleen has taught courses on her life and poetry for the Worcester Institute for Senior Education (WISE) in Massachusetts. Since joining WISE in 2019, she has also offered courses in The Gnostic Gospels, Celtic Spirituality, The Mysticism of Rumi and Francis of Assisi, Nobel Peace Prize Winners, and, recently, Religion and The Irish Troubles.

March 24, 2026

A Dream, A Drive, and a Vision: The Story behind Blue Crab Bay Co.

Pamela Barefoot

Hear how a kitchen table start up in a rural coastal area developed into a national, award-winning gourmet foods business recognized for its resilience and community involvement. From early disasters including a fire and a hurricane, Pamela Barefoot proved she had the right stuff to build a business from scratch, create jobs in her community, and put Virginia's isolated Eastern Shore on the map.

Pamela Barefoot is a native of rural North Carolina and the author of Mules & Memories: A Photo Documentary of the Tobacco Farmer. She lived most of her life in coastal Virginia, where she began an award-winning gourmet business on her kitchen table in 1985. After receiving the national specialty food association's Hall of Fame award in 2016, Barefoot sold her business and moved to Burlington's Village at Brookwood, where she stays busy with volunteer activities in her community. She was surprised to receive the association's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2025.

March 31, 2026

Fireworks! (As told by an expert)

Bob Willson

From the very first birthday of this country on July 4th, 1777, fireworks were part of the celebration. And year by year they slowly became more elaborate. But nothing has had as much impact on the business of fireworks as a little thing called a drone. From a concept of flying coordinated drones during a TED talk in 2012 - just 14 years ago! - to recent "Pyro-musicals with thousands and thousands of computer-controlled devices, sky light shows have been transformed. I don't know about you, but I remember one of the first times I saw a drone light show at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and the awe of it all. Who better to tell us about the "Booming" history of fireworks, and his part in it than a Pyro-Technician and Pyro-musical Creator named Bob Willson.

Bob Willson has degrees in Electrical Engineering and Industrial Hygiene, but for 64 years his avocation has been professional fireworks, and training others how to use them safely. Yes, it all began at 4 years old when Bob was swinging a sparkler around on the 4th of July, but since then, he has done a few "modest" shows like the fireworks for the nationally televised 1986 re-commissioning of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. And 15 years of creating and running the 4th of July fireworks for the Cincinnati Pops. Just two of his many highlights. Bob knows how fireworks are made (he's made some himself!), who makes them, and how to program them to

boom and flare with split-second timing and he is here to share some of those secrets with us. Oh yes, he also plays a mean banjo!

April 7, 2026

The Shroud of Turin: History, Mystery, and Meaning

William Tullar, Ph.D.

Explore one of the most studied religious relics in the world – the Shroud of Turin, a relic currently housed in the Cathedral of St. John in Turin, Italy, and believed by some to be the actual burial shroud of Jesus Christ. This class will examine over a century of scholarship, scientific analysis, and religious reflection surrounding the cloth. Featuring detailed images and explanations of the Shroud's many intriguing features, the session invites thoughtful curiosity about its enduring mystery.

William L. Tullar, Ph.D., is a professor of management at the Bryan School of Business and Economics at UNC Greensboro, where he has taught for 50 years. He holds a BS in Psychology from Wesleyan University, a Ph.D. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from the University of Rochester, and a master's in religion from Southern Evangelical Seminary. Dr. Tullar has served as a Fulbright Scholar in Germany and a visiting scholar in Russia, Moldova, and Germany. In addition to his academic work, he currently serves as a supply pastor in churches across Alamance and Guilford counties. He has published extensively on entrepreneurship, human resource management, and management development, and has consulted for the North Carolina DOT on leadership training and assessment.

April 14, 2026

The Great American Songbook

Gary Hastings and Turner Battle

The Great American Songbook refers to classic songs in the repertoire of American music that have become timeless musical standards that have passed through decades and are still recognized around the world and performed by musicians of many genres.

Most of these songs were written in the first half of the twentieth century from the early ragtime, jazz years, and the big band years. These songs were written by composers and lyricists. They appeared in nightclubs, early radio broadcasts, movies, records and live performances at theaters, concert halls, and intimate jazz clubs.

The body of tunes are mostly love songs that are deeply cherished by music lovers. Some writing teams produced dozens of songs while others had only one tune that has stood the test of time. These composers include Fats Waller, George and IRA Gershwin, Cole Porter, Heavy Carmichael, Irving Berlin, Duke Ellington and many more.

These songs have been performed by America's best musical artists such as Frank Sinatra, Rosemary Clooney, Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Tony Bennett, Barbara Streisand, and countless contemporary artists of today.

Gary Hastings and Turner Battle will present an intimate presentation of a wide selection of the tunes as they reveal the stories behind the music while giving a live performance using their years

of professional music experience. This keyboard and trumpet/vocal team have performed extensively with other groups around the world!

***Gary Hastings** is an accomplished jazz trumpeter who has performed in jazz settings across the country and around the world. For ten years he was the lead trumpet in the US Airways Jazz Orchestra and for over twenty-five years he toured with the Guy Lombardo Royal Canadians. He has also performed with the Glenn Miller Orchestra, the Jimmy Dorsey Orchestra, and the Nelson Riddle Orchestra. An authority on the music of Louis Armstrong, Hastings has performed many musical tributes to Armstrong's life and music. In addition, he is a retired assistant chief of police in Greensboro, North Carolina, and has authored a popular criminal investigation textbook plus five police detective novels.*

***Turner Battle** is a successful composer, arranger, keyboardist, and music producer. He has been involved in projects heard on MTV and HBO and has composed and arranged original music for major companies. He has also performed with some of the great jazz musicians and singers of our time. Among other talents, Battle is an award-winning voiceover artist, and his voice has been heard on voicemail, audiobooks, video games, walking museum tours, and more. A graduate of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, he was the principal arranger for its Blue and Gold Marching Machine Band from 1980-1987.*

April 21, 2026

Undergraduate Research Presentations

Various Elon Students

Join us for a riveting exploration of new scholarship from Elon's brightest young voices. Undergraduate Research is one of five learning requirements promoted by the University. Research offers a unique opportunity for students to engage in inquiry in their chosen field of study and to experience first-hand what professionals in a chosen field do. The research presentations of these students will encourage you to think about the world in ways you had not before.

At each LIFE@Elon session, three Elon students will present their research from various fields across the University. Each class will feature different student presentations, as class schedules and availability all vary. No matter which students speak to your class, the presentations will be compelling. A class member shared this about the student presentations:

“Over the last three years, I have continued to be amazed at the high levels of research and execution of these students' projects. To be honest I have had to keep reminding myself that these are undergraduates. In many cases, although the student is graduating, they have a plan to continue their research or have shared the plan for the next group of students who will continue their initial research. I have personally learned so much about a variety of topics and their dedication to finding the cure, making this a better place for all citizens, or taking in-depth looks at political and social issues. You don't want to miss these sessions.” – Candace Ransing, Curriculum Committee Member and Greeter

April 28, 2026

Classical Pianist goes Half-and-Half

Robert Buxton, Ph.D.

Pianist Robert Buxton is a child of immigrants from New Jersey. His mother, an immigrant from the Soviet Union, raised him on classical music from an early age. His father is an immigrant from southern Virginia, and he raised him on old time southern gospel music. Robert has done programs devoted to each style of music for LIFE@Elon and will now present a program that alternates between classical and gospel music performances and explanations, a “half-and-half program,” just like the coffee creamer.

Robert Buxton brings music from the past to life today as a performer and public speaker. He offers a unique improvised lecture-recital combination with humor, personal stories, and dazzling piano playing. As a soloist and chamber musician Buxton has performed in New York (Carnegie and Alice Tully Halls), Europe, and Japan and his interviews and recordings have been featured on major classical radio stations. He received his master's and doctorate degrees studying under Vladimir Virago at the University of North Texas.

*Presenters and topics for the weekly classes are subject to change.
Classes cancelled for any reason will not be made up and no refund will be given.*

Registration for the 2026-2027 academic year will begin on June 10! The fall 2026 dates are:

September 15, 22, 29

October 6, 13, 20, 27

November 3, 10, 17

December 1, 8