

STYLE

Firm makes learning easier

Mainers enjoy studying by mail

BY ALICIA ANSTEAD
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Frank Booker, a real estate agent, commutes regularly between Bangor and Machias. That's a two-hour drive — if the roads are clear of snow or summer people. Like many Mainers who spend an hour or more driving to and from work, Booker does not like to waste his time. He prefers, in fact, to be a student. In recent months, he has studied philosophy and music. He's in Florida at the moment, and on the long drive home, he plans to become more conversant in the basic principles of science.

"I became an opera expert in two days in the car," said Booker, who used to work as a technical director in theater. "I learned a lot about opera on a head level. I have enjoyed theater all my life but I've always felt a distance from opera. Now that distance has been bridged."

To learn about opera, Booker turned to Robert Greenberg, a graduate of Princeton and the University of California, Berkeley, a longtime faculty member of the San Francisco Conservatory, an award-winning composer and a National Public Radio contributor. Understandably, Booker couldn't exactly have

Professor Greenberg, who lives in Northern California and is now the music historian at San Francisco Performances, riding shotgun with him.

That's where Tom Rollins comes in. More than a decade ago, Rollins was a student at Harvard Law School. But he wasn't a very good student because he didn't go to his federal evidence class. When it came time for his final exam, he knew he would have to cram. He spent 10 hours in the library watching video recordings of his professor. Much in the same way he thought class would be a waste of time, he expected the tapes to be dull. They weren't. Instead, they were funny, exciting, engaging.

Rollins got an A on the final, but he also got the idea for a way to make the best scholars in the country available to everyone. In 1990, he opened The Teaching Co. in Virginia and now offers more than 130 courses on CDs, cassettes, DVDs and VHS tapes in an array of disciplines taught by professors from Harvard, Stanford, UCLA, Dartmouth and other top-rated universities and colleges.

Some lectures, such as "Einstein's Relativity and the Quantum Revolution: Modern Physics for Non-Scientists" by Richard Wolfson at Middlebury College cost as little as \$34.95 for 12 cassettes. Others, such as "Classics of American Literature" by Arnold Weinstein of Brown University, cost upwards of \$200 for 14 DVDs. The lectures run 30-45 minutes each.

While The Teaching Co. has many customers in Maine, a state whose remoteness and long winters seem to make it an ideal place for a mail-order education, Rollins argues that the series isn't about location.

"From my perspective, the whole country is isolated," said Rollins, who gave up a law career to found the company. "No one has access to a group of lecturers like this. If you lived in the center of Manhattan, you wouldn't be able to listen to most of the people we've recorded. We have a staff of several people who do nothing but fly around the coun-

try looking for the best college lecturers the country has."

Rollins and his staff travel throughout the country to listen to thousands of professors, a very small proportion of whom become part of their specialized faculty. In the studios in Chantilly, Va., more than 18,000 hours of material have been recorded on topics such as argumentation, Beethoven, ancient Rome, Islam, jazz and the Civil War — to name only a few.

"It's a very powerful way to reinvigorate an entire life of the mind that might otherwise be consumed by the same songs you've been listening to for 20 years on the radio," said Rollins. "In the course of a year, it's stunning what you can learn. We've made it economically possible. We've made it temporally possible. You can do this in your car. You can do it in the evening instead of watching a little junk television."

The convenience of it all is what attracted Stephanie Harp, a stay-at-home mom who lives in Bangor. Harp recently completed her master's degree in history, but her education isn't over. It's just that, with a small child at home, it's better for her to get that education on her own time. Like Frank Booker and many Teaching Co. customers, Harp was drawn to Robert Greenberg's course "How to Listen to and Understand Great Music." Indeed, Greenberg has made more lectures than any other professor at the company and is one of the most popular series the organization offers. Among Teaching Co. devotees, Greenberg has an Elvis-like star status.

"Most music is accessible to most people at any given moment," said Greenberg. "You just have to give them a context."

For Greenberg, the context is standing in front of cameras in a relatively empty studio (except for technicians) and recording more than 300 witty and authoritative lectures that tell 45-minute stories about the history of music.

For listeners, the context is entirely a matter of choice.

"I can get through one or two lectures in a workout," said Harp. "It's something to concentrate on and I like it because I can go back and listen and I can listen whenever I want. It's not like going to class on Tuesday at 10."