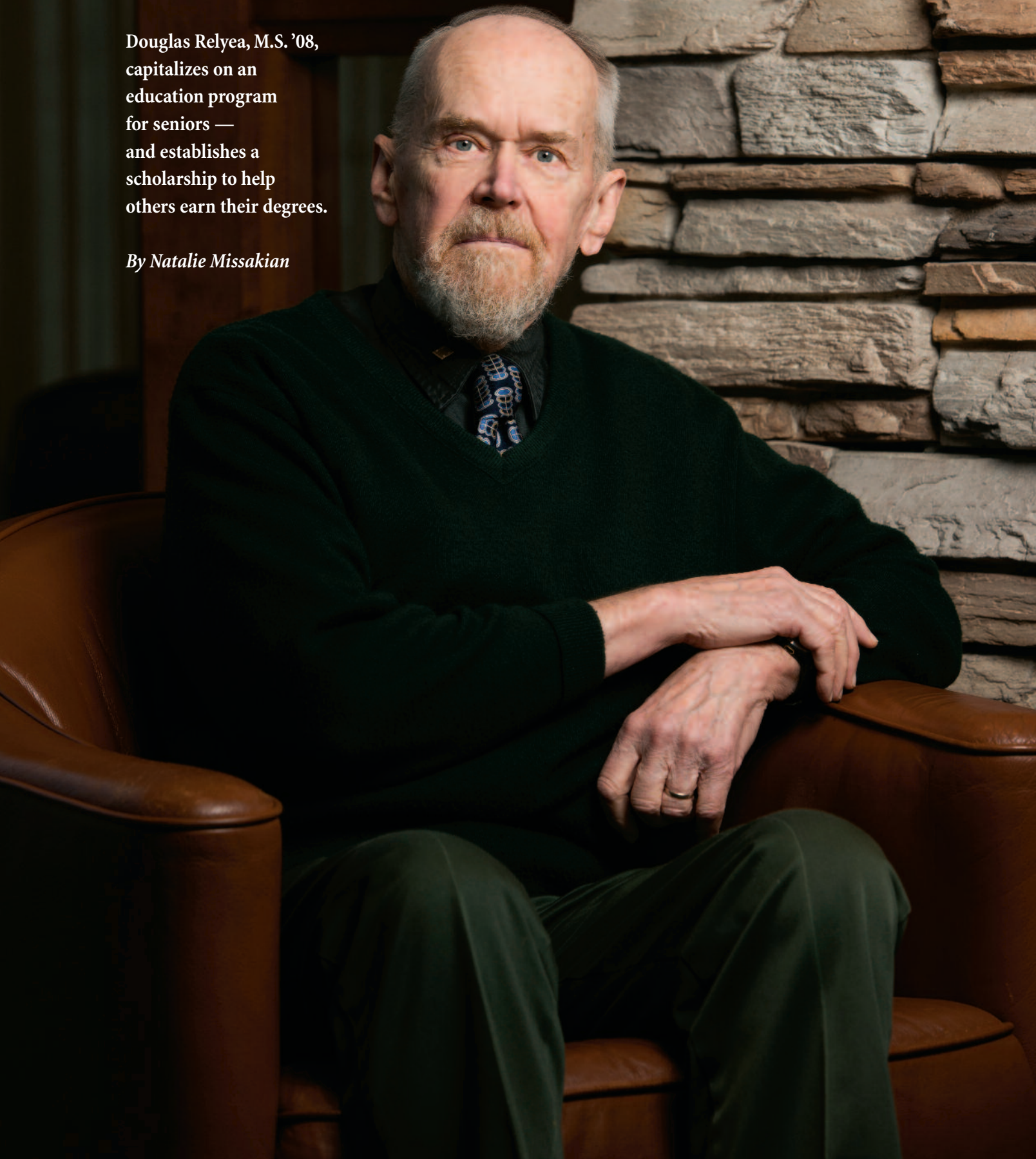


# Part Two

Douglas Relyea, M.S. '08,  
capitalizes on an  
education program  
for seniors —  
and establishes a  
scholarship to help  
others earn their degrees.

*By Natalie Missakian*



**D**ouglas Relyea, M.S. '08, takes the catchphrase “lifelong learner” to a whole new level.

The 83-year-old former chemist has spent the last 15 years taking classes at Southern, first as a graduate student pursuing his master's in biology and now — after reaching that goal in 2008 — as an undergrad majoring in French. He is a proud, if unorthodox, member of the Class of 2014, who was set to receive his bachelor's degree in May as this issue went to press.

“I give new meaning to the word “senior,” quips the octogenarian, who is minoring in German and has grandchildren the same age as many of his classmates.

Relyea is taking advantage of a program that lets Connecticut residents 62 and older enroll in courses at state public universities and colleges tuition free. Under the program, applicants can take unlimited courses where space is available after paying a registration and other basic fees. In addition to being offered at Southern, the program is available at Eastern, Central, and Western Connecticut State universities and the University of Connecticut, as well as the state's community colleges.

Relyea figures by the time he is finished, the state will have subsidized his education to the tune of nearly \$50,000. After doing the math, the Bethany, Conn., resident decided he should pay the debt forward, so he established the Douglas I. and Mary L. Relyea Endowed Scholarship at Southern, named for Relyea and his wife. The scholarship is open to undergraduate students majoring in French or German who maintain a grade point average of 2.7 or higher.

“I looked around at all these students paying for every credit and thought I really should give something back,” he says.

Relyea has a long-held commitment to education. He already holds a bachelor's from Clarkson University, a master's from Cornell, and a Ph.D. from the University of South Carolina. He also completed one year of post-doctoral studies at the University of Wisconsin and worked for 40 years as a chemist with Uniroyal. He has received 19 patents for his research, developing insecticides and fungicides for crop protection and has authored 25 scientific papers.

When he retired, his desire to keep learning drew him to Southern, where he has been taking classes since at least 1999. Steven Burian, chair of the Biology Department, who worked with Relyea on his master's thesis, notes that it's likely Relyea had taken all of the biology courses in Southern's catalog.

“He took a huge number of courses, probably double the number of courses that you need for a master's degree,” Burian recalls.

Relyea says he pursued his master's in biology because he has a deep interest in insects, entomology, and ecology — a curiosity that was piqued during his many years working on insecticides. His master's thesis focused on the taxonomy of the mayfly.

His interest in world languages also goes back to his days as a chemist. He was expected to have rudimentary knowledge of French and German because scientific terminology was rooted in

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those languages, but he always wanted to master them, he says.

Relyea jokingly calls himself a transfer student, explaining that Southern gave him credit for 10 liberal arts classes he took while earning his first bachelor's degree more than 60 years ago. He also received a waiver for the mandatory “Introduction to Wellness.”

Relyea has run a total of 180 road races and 120 biathlons and continued to run until a knee injury eight years ago forced him to give up the sport. He estimates he has logged around 35,000 miles.

“I'd done races. I had a body mass index (BMI) of 21. I have an annual physical exam. I eat three meals a day at a table. I was, at the time, 81 or 82 and still breathing in and out. Did I really need a course in Introduction to Wellness?” he recalls. So he wrote to the department chair of Public Health and pleaded his case. He quickly got an e-mail back from his secretary, telling him that the department chair was granting the waiver “and we both envy your BMI.”

Luke Eilderts, assistant professor of French, says Relyea brings a different perspective to the classroom than a student fresh out of high school.

“He's beloved by his fellow students. He's very intelligent,” says Eilderts, who coordinates the French program.

Burian adds that Relyea was a role model for the fledgling scientists in his classes, who were learning how to ask the right questions and apply scientific principles.

“Doug was great at that because he already had all that background. It was second nature because that's how he lived his life,” Burian says.

When the class discussed research papers, for example, Relyea often questioned their conclusions. Sometimes he even re-did the analyses. “He would never accept anything at face value — which is how science should be,” Burian says.

Relyea says he is getting an “excellent” education at Southern and notes that a key to finding happiness in the golden years is to come up with a five- to 10-year plan before retiring. “Don't just leave the job and go home and put your feet up and watch TV,” he says.