



“

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”

- Winnie Drentlaw

three Women, three Longstanding Groups, one Common Thread

By SARAH OSTERBAUER

Winnie

Winnie Drentlaw belongs to four different bridge groups. She's a true lover of the game and enjoys the company of those who play. However, only one group is riding on a 58-year track record. No, that's not a typo. Winnie knows the exact year they started playing because her 58-year old daughter, born prematurely, was in the hospital at the time. Through a friend with the Northfield Junior Chamber of Commerce (the women's group consisting primarily of the wives of the Chamber) Winnie was invited to join the bridge group. Today's group of eight still retains five original members. All of the women are in their 80's. Winnie herself is a cool 88 years young, "and single" she says, as her husband passed away six years ago.

When asked why Winnie suspects the group has endured for so long, she said "Well, I don't really know why. We enjoy each other and we have a great time together." Had they ever experienced any issues, interpersonal type things, spats, cattiness? None that she could recall. While Winnie admitted it was difficult to remember the fine details of their beginnings, it was clear she genuinely felt there were no notable squabbles to highlight. Could the reason be in part that everyone was a lot more polite back then? "Yes, maybe" she said. In the 1970's no one had a cellphone with constant updates about other things going on that could disrupt their bridge meetings. No one could text at the last minute to say they couldn't make it. No, once they made the commitment to attend, they stuck with it.

They meet once a month now, in the afternoons, generally at 1 p.m.

until about 4 p.m. Meetings start with coffee and dessert, followed by 18 hands of bridge (usually). Hosting duties rotate amongst the members. 58 years in, some of these women are Winnie's best friends. They have seen each other become mothers, raise young children into adults, start jobs, open businesses, retire, and lose family and friends to the inevitability of life. They've known each other longer than much of the world's population has been alive. In Winnie's own words, what



Faith and Books group.

keeps her coming back is that "(bridge is) kind of a challenging game. It seems you can always learn something new. And sociability. Mainly that."

PREVIOUS PAGE: Faith and Books group.

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Pam

When Pam Santerre became the pastoral minister at Bethel Lutheran Church in 2006, her work focused on adult ministry. She wanted to remind people that the Divine is present in everyday life and one good way to do that was through literature. Thus, Faith and Books was born. She found a small group of six to participate, and every Thursday morning they would meet to discuss a common book (which may or may not be classified as Christian or religious). The reading schedule is predetermined. In the early days Pam led the discussion. Quickly word spread and the group grew quite large; too large for the small Northfield coffee shops they had been meeting in. Eventually they settled on gathering at Bethel, which had the space they needed and - more importantly - Pam says, "access to a coffee maker."

Most of the members were from the Bethel community, but all were welcome to join. With ages ranging from 50 to 90 years old, the conversation around the books was friendly and purposeful. The group faced few challenges, most of which were in the form of the occasional political conversation. Even then (for the most part) the group was able to agree to disagree.

For Pam, the benefits of Faith and Books far outweighed any negatives. "[I gained] such joy in listening to the stories and gleaning wisdom shared in the conversation. Living my faith in our society is not easy but I always left with renewed courage and conviction to try," she said. "I cared deeply for the other members and felt their care for me."

One of their more senior members had a deep commitment to the group, attending in spite of any health issue, bringing her oxygen tank along if need be. On holidays, this member would dress in costume, "a good reminder not to take ourselves too seriously," Pam said.

When Pam left her role at Bethel in 2013, she also forfeited her leadership role with Faith and Books. However, the group still continues to meet.

Jan

When Jan Stevens was a young woman living in Iowa, the demands of her busy schedule made the task of making friends a difficult one. She was close to her sisters and phoned them often, but she craved a community connection. A few people suggested getting involved with



PEO group.

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the PEO sisterhood. The more she learned about their mission, the more interested she became.

The origins of PEO date back to 1869. It was founded with the goal of supporting women's education. According to their website, Minnesota has more than 150 chapters with 6,400+ members. There are chapters across the globe, organizing projects and fundraising, supporting and promoting education for women. Once Jan joined, the connection was instantaneous.

Suddenly she had a whole network of women who not only befriended her but supported her. "The warmth and friendship I received from PEO was just lovely," Jan said. When she had to pack up her family and move to Minnesota, it was the women of PEO who watched her toddler so she could pack. Once she was settled, a Minnesota chapter member reached out to her to join them.

Chapters are required to have 15 meetings a year but there are no strict attendance requirements. In Jan's group there are about 50 members; about 25 of them are active at any one time. The meetings are structured with a speaker and a discussion topic, followed by social time.

"It makes me take time to sit down and have a cup of coffee or tea with some women [when] sometimes I'm too busy and too driven to do that," Jan said. Women range in age from 20 to 100, but Jan noted that - in general - women in the group tend to be older. Jan suggested that the demands and expectations of today's parents do not leave a lot of time for women with young children to be involved.

Their only rules are to be kind. To join, you need to be invited; however it's not as exclusive as it sounds. To know what PEO stands for, you have to be a member. Jan assured me it's not bad, but the club rule is not to disclose it to non-members.

In addition to the elusive full name of the group, they also have a network of members that provide hospitality to traveling members. For a nominal fee, you can be hosted by a member, with all the proceeds going back to the club's goal, educating women, a club-member-only Airbnb if you will.

It's clear when you talk to Jan about PEO what she loves most about the group are the bonds formed with other women and the open

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heartedness and kindness they have shown her from Day 1. Jan mentions more than once that there's a certain "sweetness" that permeates throughout the group that she loves, a main reason for her 32-year tenure with the group.

Each of these women and their respective groups are different in many ways, but the common thread is one of human connection. Each woman felt the biggest benefit from being a member was the social component. Breathing in the conversation, feeling respected and supported while achieving a common goal, made each woman come away feeling better about herself.

In this day and age, it's tough to imagine a

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group withstanding 10, 20 or 30 years, much less 58. We are lucky if we can get five people to commit and attend one dinner, much less a meeting every month. There's no doubt groups of this nature are special, and serve a purpose for their members beyond the obvious mission.

Winnie's group is so much more than a game of cards. Faith and Books is so much more than the reading. PEO is so much more than supporting women's education. The gravity and power of being in a community of women who have your back cannot be understated and is as important now as it was in 1869.

Sarah Osterbauer is a freelance writer based in St. Paul.