

Relationships

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The Whiners (right) have been friends for nearly 30 years. Clockwise above from top left: Cynthia Spencer, Jo Dahlin, Kris Garrick, Pauline Clark, Judith Manning, Nancy Gentry and Kate Tryhorn; Mary Ann Rhodes isn't present.



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These women know how to have a good time. Collectively known as the Whiners, they jazz up their get-togethers with out-of-the-box fun that often leads to raucous, side-splitting laughter.

By **L.J. Sellers**
Photos by **Collin Andrew**
SPECIAL PUBLICATIONS

They've been kicked to the back of restaurants for having too much fun. They go bowling in goofy costumes and give each other bizarre Christmas gifts just for kicks. Women Humorously Irreverent about Nearly Everything, aka the Whiners, have been hanging out together for 26 years — and the laughter is what keeps them going.

After decades of lunches, birthdays and themed parties, their memories are fuzzy, and sometimes they have to get out the photographs to be certain who dressed in the cheerleader outfit or who brought the crucifix-shaped meatloaf. But looking back is part of the fun.

"We're the keepers of each other's history," says Judith Manning, summing up how everyone feels.

The group first got together in 1983 when most of the women worked for the Springfield Utility Board. They would go out for birthday lunches at El Kiosco, where the staff quickly learned to move them to the back room.

The lunches expanded to happy hours, and eventually the women started gathering for potlucks at members' homes where no one could shush them or toss them out.

They discovered a mutual love of movies, which led to Academy Awards nights, jazzed up by dressing in Oscar-worthy gowns or as a favorite movie star.

Once the costumes got started, there was no holding back. The group quickly adopted any opportunity to wear hats, togas or feather boas.

After a few wild Academy Awards evenings, more theme parties followed. Bowling for Identities, in which the women bowled in costumes of their choice, led Kris Garrick to create her “Stinky” character, a nerd complete with high-waisted pants, taped-together glasses and a funny voice.

“This group has made me a little more fearless in all ways,” Kris says. “Once you go beyond worrying about what people are going to think, you can just go nuts and not care.”

Kate Tryhorn once hosted an English tea party, where they all dressed “in little suits and gloves.” The prim and properness lasted all of five minutes before devolving into the usual raucous roar.

“They’ve been there for everything,” Kate says in describing what the Whiners have meant to her. “They are the most constant thing in my life. We all change, but the group doesn’t change.”

The Whiners have held a swimming party, a séance, and once played Pin the Tail on a nude male model poster, only they weren’t aiming for the tail. Putting their own spin on games is a favorite activity.

They’ve played a twisted version of Truth or Dare called Well I Never, which quickly became a contest to shock each other.

“Oh my God,” Jo Dahlin says. “It was crazy.”

At a party hosted by Cynthia Spencer, the women played their own version of Fictionary. They faked the words, made up their own definitions, and “came unglued.”

The phrase “Rogation Days” came up. No one remembers how they defined it, but they all remember spitting out their drinks in laughter. A new standard for funny was set.

Friends to count on

“These women are the connection to the best and the worst times in my life,” Cynthia says. “When I was in a horrible job, they made it manageable. I’ve come and gone from the group a few times because I moved, but when I come back, it’s like I never left.”

The friends have had their serious moments. Early on, they held a baby shower for Pauline Clark, and every Whiner put something into a time capsule for Pauline’s daughter to open when she turned 16. The group was all there a decade and a half later when Kelsey opened the sealed capsule.

“These people are loyal and supportive,” Pauline says, her voice filled with emotion. “The year my mother died, Mary Ann took me to Utah to the Sun-



The Whiners’ icon, named Awhina, is akin to “Flat Stanley.”

dance Film Festival. She really took care of me.”

Supporting each other through the tears is as much a Whiner trait as making each other laugh. They feel fortunate they’ve had many more opportunities to laugh.

Mary Ann Rhodes is famous for her Christmas parties, which in Whiner world are the most irreverent of all. Good Gifts/Bad Gifts is a popular theme, with bad gifts being the most fun. One year, Jo gift-wrapped a toilet seat with a picture of Richard Nixon on the lid. Peggy Potter once gave a crocheted candle holder that generated more than its share of lewd comments.

When Peggy (the ninth member) moved to Montana, the group held a séance in honor of her parting. Judith, dressed in her finest gypsy clothes, brought a crystal ball and conjured up people from Peggy’s life

The Whiners

Kris Garrick

Occupation: CAD goddess at engineering firm. **Hobbies:** Movies, fashion, reading, photography, skiing, biking and being a sports fan. **Claim to fame:** “Stinky” for costume bowling party.

Johanna (Jo) Dahlin

Occupation: Retired administrative assistant, Mary Kay Cosmetics consultant. **Hobbies:** Movies, theater, performing arts, reading, walking and self-improvement. **Claim to fame:** The “glue” that holds the group together.

Kate Tryhorn

Occupation: Long-retired volunteer for animal rescue. **Hobbies:** Horse riding and reading. **Claim to fame:** “Maude” of the group and a wonderful cook.

Nancy Gentry

Occupation: Clinical therapist. **Hobbies:** Reading, gardening and whining. **Claim to fame:** “Princess for day” event with limo and black-tie attire.

— Whiners dressed in character, giving a spiel. Nancy Gentry appeared as Peggy the high-school cheerleader, Kate offered guidance as Peggy’s mother, and Kris came as a gossipy janitor from their workplace.

Over the years, the Whiners have been there for each other’s weddings and divorces, births and deaths, cancer treatments and career changes.

When Nancy earned her psychology degree and left her job at SUB, they hosted a special last-day-of-work party. Nancy had once mentioned a desire to leave work at noon and never come back. Her friends made it happen in glorious Whiner style. They swooped her up in a champagne-filled limo with everyone dressed for an evening on the town, topped by glitter-covered sombreros made by Kate. They had a formal portrait taken, lunched at Mount Pisgah, and lounged at the Valley River Inn. Throughout the afternoon, they serenaded Nancy with songs written for the occasion.

“We’ll all be talking at once, then someone will break into a song or a dance,” Nancy says. “There are no inhibitions here. These are the most creative, intelligent and vibrant women I know.”

Twenty-six years ago, the Whiners saw each other as “kindred spirits,” and that feeling hasn’t changed.

“It’s family,” Kris says, describing her bond to the group.

“It’s better than family,” Jo adds, laughing. “These people are fun.”

Staff writer **L.J. Sellers** can be contacted at dash@registerguard.com.

Judith Manning

Occupation: Graphic designer for Emerald People’s Utility District. **Hobbies:** Singing and art. **Claim to fame:** Séance fortuneteller and lyric writer of Whiner songs.

Pauline Clark

Occupation: Buyer, Springfield Utility Board. **Hobbies:** Family, friends, home improvement, reading and scrapbooking. **Claim to fame:** The thoughtful one and maker of clever objects.

Cynthia Spencer

Occupation: Potter and director of Corvallis Fall Festival. **Hobbies:** Reading and traveling. **Claim to fame:** Hosted “Rogation Days” party that set the group’s standard for funny.

Mary Ann Rhodes

Occupation: Retired utility executive, part-time PR consultant. **Hobbies:** Reading, writing, watching movies, music, singing, photography and traveling. **Claim to fame:** Most outrageous and best Christmas party host.

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