

Friends for life: Six tight-knit women share their time-tested wisdom about friendship

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Once a month, a group of Springfield-area retired nurses gets together over dessert and a game of Tripoley to trade stories and share the “this and that” of their lives.

They’ve kept up the ritual for 60 years.

“At first, the talk was about boyfriends and dating. Then about marriage and children. Now it’s about gall bladders and hysterectomies,” said Maxine Salefski, a former surgical nurse who, like the other five, graduated from St. John’s School of Nursing.

The social gatherings — which have become smaller as classmates moved out of town or died — started as an offshoot of the school’s annual alumni banquets.

“We thought the 25-year class looked old till we got there. Then we thought the 50-year class looked old till we got there,” Salefski said.

Between the six, they have 10 children, 73 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

Five of the 80-somethings finished nursing school in 1948, while Rita Rolando, who worked in obstetrics at St. John’s Hospital, is a 1942 graduate. The nursing students all lived in the school’s dorm back then, forging friendships over dining hall meals and homework.

They call their group the Nurses’ Club, and they say it was easier to make friends in the 1940s.

“You didn’t have to have meetings back then. Families were closer and you lived in extended families. There was no air conditioning, so you went outside to cool off and talk to your neighbors,” said Barbara Poole, a former pediatric nurse.

“Now, there’s a time factor. Women don’t have time, or they think they don’t,” she added.

Debbie Mandel is the author of “Addicted to Stress: A Woman’s 7 Step Program to Reclaim Joy and Spontaneity in Life” (Jossey-Bass, 2008). She said a shared history is a common foundation for successful friendships.

“Those friends know things about you that other people will never know because they have observed you over the years,” said Mandel, who lives in New York City.

“There’s a predictability about a relationship like that, a point of permanence. Sometimes things don’t even need to be said.”

With enduring friendships, Mandel said, there’s not the pressure of reciprocity common in new relationships.

“You don’t have that ‘She called me, now I have to call her’ mindset. You can drift in mid-sentence and pick up a month later. And your friends can fill in some of your memories.”

That was apparent last month when the Nurse’s Club got together at the home of Mabel Bicknell, who worked as a nurse at a state mental hospital.

Over Dutch apple pie and vanilla ice cream dished up by Mabel’s husband of 56 years, Marvin, the women reminded each other of past details while sharing stories of upcoming dinners and expectant granddaughters.

“Women are very relationship-oriented,” Mandel said. “If you outgrow a friend, you can feel like a failure.”

Mary Byers is a Chatham-based public speaker and author of five books, including “The Mother Load: How to Meet Your Own Needs While Caring for Your Family” (Harvest House Publishers, 2005).

One element of a lasting friendship, she said, is the willingness to invest time.

"The best friendships are between individuals who are equally, or almost equally, willing to take the time to nurture and grow the friendship. They are the type of friends who show up in a crisis, willingly provide a listening ear and walk through the hard times of life with one another."

Calling, e-mailing, sending cards, writing notes, sharing rituals (like birthday lunches) and getting together regularly fosters a long friendship, Byers said.

"Apathy leads to the end of a relationship," she added.

Both Mary Kay Cullen, a retired surgical nurse, and Mary Nestler, a veteran of Springfield Clinic and St. John's Hospital, said women in long relationships learn to overlook small annoyances and reach out to help their friends.

"Don't judge harshly," Salefski added. "The other person isn't always wrong."

Members of the Nurse's Club haven't always met for dessert and a penny game of Tripoley. Over the years they've taken trips, shared dinners with their husbands and had get-togethers with their families.

Now, one uses a walker and another has a wheelchair. They're not as mobile, but still make the effort to get to the monthly gatherings.

"We always look forward to this," Salefski said. "It's always on the calendar."

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