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The women of Alderdale Drive

Taco salad, skorts and skinny dipping: Sterling Heights neighbors honor their friendship with annual girls getaway

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A note from Susan: These women, from a single block on a single street in Sterling Heights, have since invited me to join their annual reunion. But that wouldn't be right: I never lived on Alderdale.

Three vote Republican. Three vote for Democrats. Three swing either way, or no way.

Three go to church every weekend where, as one says, "We pray for the rest of 'em."

They range in age from 44 to 68.

Yet they hold in common two important things:

All bought homes on the same block of Alderdale Drive in Sterling Heights. And none has been away from husbands and children and duties and dogs since this time last year.

Responsible wives and mothers, they don't get away much. They don't complain about their obligations. But yow, do they enjoy what they call their annual Alderdale Ladies Weekend.

This year, the 13th annual weekend stretches across four warm days near Hale, at the second home of Carol Freeman and her husband, whose name nobody mentions. And I forget to ask.

Carol bought a plastic banner she hung on the deck for the occasion: "Welcome to Paradise!"

"It is Paradise," she tells me as we stand between two blow-up palm trees and Long Lake laps gently at the grassy shore. "It's just us! It's just girls! It's the best weekend of the year."

Alesia McCarthy puts it directly: "It is so damn much fun."

These get-togethers happen more often than most of us imagine, friends or family joining annually for a little down time together. But journalists aren't usually invited. I was, by Brenda Molinar, who wrote to me: "Our Alderdale Ladies Weekend is not about where we go, or what we do, but that we get together, as we have for 13 years. The love, compassion and true friendship will forever bind us."

For example, the night before I arrived, a bunch of them stayed up until 1 a.m. to play a variation of rummy called May I?, drinking adult beverages, munching Good & Plentys and, as one of them explains, "singing stupid songs," including "Choo Choo Charlie"-songs nobody knows all the words to.

This is clearly a gathering of women, not men. When I walk in, about 5 p.m. Friday, three of the four women can't shake my hand because their hands are wet from doing cooking chores.

During our hours together, most of them tear up at one point or another, telling a story about their abiding friendship. They take showers before dinner.

Squeezed around the glass-topped table on the deck, they compliment everyone's recipes, including Jan Nadolski's "taco salad in a bag": Throw lettuce, onions, cheese, Doritos, cooked ground beef, taco spices and bottled green goddess dressing in a white plastic garbage bag. Shake.

That afternoon, they put away quite a bit of Carol's only-for-the-girls concoction: pineapple rum, coconut rum, Southern Comfort, orange juice, Sprite and Hawaiian Punch.

Children's names are also tossed around like beach balls: Among them, they had 22 children on a block where once, when the homes were new, 52 children lived.

Six were pregnant at the same time. And when Brenda Molinar's 20-year-old son, John, heads back to Iraq in September, all of them will worry, and write, and send care packages.

How does such a tradition start? Most of the women moved onto their block of Alderdale in 1987 when their homes were built. They are ranches and colonials, about 2,000 square feet, with three bedrooms, 2 1/2 baths and two-car attached garages.

"We're not a rich street," says Jan Nadolski. "Except in friendship," retorts Carol. "Money only goes so far."

Hungry for intimacy, they staged block parties and arranged progressive dinners. In 1994, Sue Kutskill, who's got a cottage on Higgins Lake, said out loud: "Wouldn't it be really fun to have a girls weekend?"

That first year, six women gathered, surprised that sharing the cottage's one bathroom proved no challenge at all. To speed up the intimacy, they played Two Truths and a Lie. But they agreed early on: The only rule of the Alderdale Ladies Weekend is no rules.

Since then, they've moved around, taking turns at one another's second homes. They like Carol's house because it has two bathrooms and beds, if they share, for eight of them, although Alesia and Jan prefer the living room sofas.

Early on, not all the women could get their husbands to take charge of the kids for a weekend. Some husbands predicted disaster.

"They thought we weren't capable," says Brenda "of starting a Jet Ski," say, or unplugging a toilet. "But we're blasted capable."

Jan: "They really think we need them. We let them think that." Says Joyce Plummer, at 68 the oldest among them: "For 50 years, I've let mine think I need him." She's thrilled women who could be her daughters still include her.

Carol: "We give each other confidence to be the people we can be."

In 13 years, the weekend has stretched from 36 hours to, for most of the women, 72 hours. Two women who moved away still return for the event. Sue Pianello from Shelby Township and Kim Siebers, in a two-hour drive from Grand Rapids. "She misses us," Carol says of Kim, the quietest of the gang, and Kim nods.

Do I see a tear in her eye?

And no, they've had no disasters.

Well, sure, one year Carol walked straight into a sliding glass window, but both survived unbroken. One year, they locked themselves out of a cottage and Alesia got stuck crawling through a window.

One year, Carol's dad died a week before their gathering and everyone worried about the stress they'd inflict. But she took comfort from their companionship.

Three years ago, Pattie Alef had just been laid off from Henry Ford Health Systems. "I felt so guilty, spending money to come up here." (Each spends about \$90.) "But being home for the weekend wouldn't help me get a job. I needed this."

The weekend is less about therapy than teasing, laughing, reminiscing, reinforcing. Every Saturday night, they dress identically to head out on the town to dinner or a movie, making up tales to tell curious strangers.

One year at a karaoke bar, they claimed to be in a choir, until their performance revealed the lie. Another year, Alesia ad-libbed that they were sisters, with a common mother but nine different fathers.

This year, they wore white shorts or skorts and turquoise shirts Sue Kutskill (a teacher, with the summer off) bought at Kohl's for \$10.60 each. They presented me, too, with an honorary matching shirt, even though I couldn't be with them on Saturday when, for the first time, they didn't go out, content with leftovers, right where they were.

Is Hale like Vegas - what happens there stays there? They shrug. What's to tell? Oh, sure, once, years ago, a few of them went skinny dipping and Jan shot a photo of them lifting their swimsuits out of the water. But, they agree, "Our husbands wouldn't understand."

And they nod vigorously when Carol says: "We probably know more about each other than our families do."

On the deck, Carol waves her hand at her property while her friends howl about something inside. "It's not a million dollar house," she says. "It's a manufactured home. But we've got water. We've got beach."

By my count, they also have a big blow-up raft, six smaller rafts, four tubes, one Jet Ski, decks of cards, games like Scrabble, Sequence and dominos, a half-dozen rented movies, and food to feed 100 of them.

And they've got one another.

[Alderdale ladies by the numbers](#)

This year, 10 attended the reunion, but only nine were present when answering these questions:

Married to their original husbands: Nine

Total children: 22

Total grandchildren: Three

Work for pay outside the home: Seven

Women with one or both parents still living: Four

Teenagers in the house: Seven

Have had sleepless nights in the past month: Five

Empty nesters: One

Dogs: Six

Cats: None

Color their hair: Nine

Color their hair at home: Four

Highest fee for professional hair coloring: \$100

Prices they pay for haircuts: \$12- \$40

Exercise regularly: Eight

Go to church most weekends: Five

Attend church even on Ladies Weekend: Three

Paint toenails: Seven

Paint fingernails: Five

Underwire bras: Six

Tattoos: None

Weigh less than last year: Two

Weigh more than last year: Four

Total rings worn: 17

Postmenopausal: Three

Premenopausal: Five

Speeding tickets in the last year: None

Lost a loved one to breast cancer: Three

Pierced ears: Eight

Second homes: Four

Know a soldier in Iraq: Nine

Smokers: None

Former smokers: Four