

Women's Group Creates a Space for The Life of the Mind

40-Year Series Was Started by Stay-at-Home Moms

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By Cari Shane Parven

Almost nothing can get in the way of Hilary Barnes Hoopes's attendance at a special Wednesday morning speakers series. It is there, in a Bethesda church, that she listens to experts, politicians and authors talk about a range of topics, from childhood obesity to quilting to Paleolithic cave paintings.

Hoopes, a mother of 7-year-old twins and a 4-year-old, not only has the opportunity to hear nationally recognized speakers, she also connects intellectually with other women, many of them stay-at-home moms.

"I don't miss it, I can't miss it," said Hoopes, 38, an adjunct professor of museum education at George Washington University. "I've been here every Wednesday for the past year. I don't even bother checking to see who the speaker is." Many of the 130 members, who come from across the area, find it hard to stay away.

Some describe the group as an "intellectual jump-start" or "academic retreat." For others it's a "sanity pill" or a "sacred hour." What everyone does agree on is that it is a break from a day that otherwise can be all about kids or work.

"It's a lifesaving force when you think you're brain-dead," said Cathy Bamji, 43, a Silver Spring mother of two school-age children who worked previously as a consultant. "When you're caught up in a 2-year-old's world and a 4-year-old's language, you get intellectual stimulation, a support group, friendship and an adult perspective."

"These women know about female generational angst," said author Iris Krasnow, a four-time speaker at the Wednesday Morning Group and an American University journalism professor. "A lot of them have shelved, tailored their careers to do wifedom, child care, motherhood."

The Wednesday Morning Group has been offering a venue for academic discussion for 44 years and has grown into a popular series that attracts prominent figures who speak for free. A baby-sitting co-op is a favorite feature for parents of younger children. Most of the attendees are stay-at-home moms, and 60 percent have advanced degrees. About 45 percent of the members are women who work outside the home.

"It's obvious that we met a huge need for women," said Wanda Van Goor, 78, of Chevy Chase, who helped start the group. "It was [initially] all about my own needs, but it's obvious that we met a huge need for all women."

"It's incredible that it's lasted," said Roz Hiebert, 76, of Rockville, another founding member who in the early 1960s had four children under 7.

In 1962, Van Goor and Hiebert and another mother, all members of Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church in Bethesda, started the Wednesday Morning Group, innocently enough, as a get-together for women with college educations who opted to stay at home with their children. These women were not looking for a play group for their kids; they were looking for something for themselves, and for them that meant intellectual stimulation.

"I told my husband that one day he would walk into the house and find me in the back of the closet in a fetal position," said Van Goor, an English professor at Prince George's Community College. "I was going crazy. I just wanted to talk to other adults. . . . I started [the group] out of sheer necessity."

The group put up a flier and in a few months had 50 members. They hired babysitters and created a baby-sitting co-op. Four decades later, the co-op is virtually unchanged except for the baby-sitting fee, which has risen from a nickel to \$5 an hour. Rules allow babies younger than 4 months in the lecture hall for breast-feeding.

"You feel guilty because you decided to stay at home, but you do need a break from the drooling and the diapers," said Chris Hakenkamp, 41, of North Potomac, who has a PhD in stream ecology and two young children. "The babysitting is key. By having a co-op where other parents are watching your kids, other parents who really care, you can let go of some of your guilt."

The group offers an average of 32 lectures a year and members pay \$80 a year, much of which is donated to Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church, where the sessions are held. "When we book a speaker, we tell them there's no stipend, but that we offer incredibly good questions," said Joan Wolf, 45, of Bethesda, a group member for 13 years.

The speakers have included ABC News political commentator Cokie Roberts, child psychologist Stanley I. Greenspan, former state representative Connie Morella, critically acclaimed chef Nora Pouillan, feminist and author Naomi Wolf, ABC correspondent Ann Compton, fertility specialist Michael Levy and award-winning author Judith Viorst. Kim Gandy, president of the National

Organization for Women, and Bruce Laingen, one of the hostages held in Iran in the 1970s, also have appeared.

"I speak to many, many groups, but I remember this group very well because they stood out," Viorst said. "I was impressed with how thoughtful and articulate they were. It was an amazing group of women wrestling with very difficult questions, and I knew where they were coming from. I brought them a photo of me after my first child was born. I'm standing in a ratty bathrobe, my husband's socks, and my hair hadn't been brushed for a few days. I wanted to let them know that life gets better than this."

Mike McCurry, who served as press secretary to President Clinton, spoke to the group last year. "That was a pretty darn impressive collection of women," said McCurry, a principal at Public Strategies Inc., a public affairs firm. "They do an incredible job of picking apart anyone who is brave enough to speak to them. They are a thoughtful mix of political opinions, and there are few places left where people of different political opinions get together."

Though the speakers appreciate their audience, the members are grateful for the "intellectual injection, the escape from real life," said Joan Wolf, who takes a break from her work as a real estate agent at Gerlach Real Estate nearly every Wednesday morning. "This group has pinpointed exactly what a mother needs."

"It taps into our curiosity and desire to always want to keep learning," added Hoopes, a member of the group for six years. "When I walk out of here, I've learned something, and that's what gives me the extra skip in my step." The group has weathered political and social changes and membership challenges. There was a time in the '80s when many of the participants went back to work after having children. The group almost lost its footing but survived with eight members. In the '90s, membership jumped. By 2001 there was a one-year waiting list and 250 members.

Still, the group has not changed much over the years. It is still what its founders intended: a place for intellectual renewal. "It makes it more palatable to be at home when you are looking forward to Wednesdays," said Karen Auerbach, 39, of Bethesda, who worked as a public interest lawyer before having three children. "It gives me the intellectual outlet to learn things you are not getting at home."

"The subject matter and presentation is right on target," says Bela Meghani, 39, of Montgomery Village, a stay-at-home mom who worked previously as a museum educator and has been a member for three months.

Members also appreciate the amenities. Organizers make sure there is always chocolate available during coffee hour and half-and-half instead of skim. In addition, as a gesture of respect, mothers of members can attend for free. "If you are open to the things you can learn from these lectures, you can't wait to come," Wolf said. "We find people who are so passionate about what they are saying, you get caught up in it."

Such as the retired nurse who spoke about Baltimore Album quilting. Wolf described her as "unintentionally inspiring" as she told the stories of each square on the quilt and left the room in tears. "Impressively organized and provocative" was Warren Brown, who abandoned a law career, maxed out his credit cards and opened his own bakery, Cakelove, which is now featured on the Food Network. And Dan Knise was all "contagious energy" as he discussed how he led the District's bid to host the 2012 Olympics. "His enthusiasm was impressive and admirable," Wolf said.

The group considers itself an anomaly. Not only have splinter groups been attempted and failed, members who have moved away have been unsuccessful in transplanting the concept to other cities. "I thought Wednesday Morning Group would have a lifeline, but not like this," Van Goor said. "It's been like watching one of your kids grow up," said Hiebert, "and succeed."

The Wednesday Morning Group meets during the school year and abides by the Montgomery County public school calendar and snow cancellations. Doors open at 9:30 a.m. for coffee and conversation. The speaker series begins at 10 and ends promptly at 11.

For membership information and a calendar of events and speakers, go to <http://www.wmggroup.org>.