

Charismatic Scores Upset Victory in Kentucky Derby | SPORTS, Page D1

Weather

Today: Sunny and warm.
High 72, Low 48.

Monday: Mostly sunny,
breezy. High 76, Low 52.

Details, Page C10.

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Mothers of Achievement

Lecture Circle Lures Illustrious Résumés

By DONNA ST. GEORGE
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In a small stone chapel in Bethesda, a crowd of Washington women gathered to contemplate how journalists cover the news. Their mornings had started in another world, with crying babies, soggy diapers, Cheerio-flinging toddlers. But now they were tuned in to global events, rapt as Bob Wheelock, an ABC producer, told them he had started the day at the White House, coordinating morning reports about Kosovo.

When the time came for questions, one woman offered careful praise for a satellite image ABC had broadcast of the war-ravaged land. Her words had a startling ring of authority. She knew Yugo-



BY BILL O'LEARY—THE WASHINGTON POST

Pam Sherman, center, and Wendy Greenwald, who is holding Sherman's daughter Eliza, talk with ABC producer Bob Wheelock, a speaker at their mothers group in Bethesda.

slavia, knew the technology. "That's what I did in my life before kids," she finally allowed. "I analyzed that stuff."

Lisa Engle, mother of two, was a CIA intelligence analyst on Yugoslavia before leaving the work force to care for her children. And in a mother's group that reflects the high-achievement culture in

which it was created, this distinction made Engle much like everyone else.

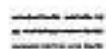
These women call themselves the Wednesday Morning Group, and they are remarkable for their collective ambition. Not only are they 190 strong—and holding—

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but they've created a well-oiled machine. They manage to bring in high-voltage lecturers every week, including thinkers as celebrated and diverse as feminist Naomi Wolf, commentator Cokie Roberts, author Alice McDermott. They run a cooperative nursery. They produce a newsletter.

And they have endured, in one form or another, for 37 years—testament to one small part of a world that goes unnoticed in the whirlwind of work-minded Washington: the world of women at home.

"Maybe we all came to Washington to pursue high-powered careers, and now we're being high-powered stay-at-home moms," said Pam Sherman, 36, a lawyer-turned-actress and mother of two. "You're not going to lose that intensity because you had kids."



In a region where 65 percent of women are on the job, the Wednesday Morning Group is a bit of an aberration. Most members do not work outside the home. Most live in Bethesda, Chevy Chase, Silver Spring, Rockville, Potomac and Kensington, and get by—in some cases, very comfortably—on one income. This is not how most of America lives.

Still, what is striking is their elaborate professional achievement—how thoroughly they were trained for their careers, how strongly many were defined by their jobs and, in many cases, though not nearly all, how difficult the choice was to stay at home.

They reflect, in a larger way, the continuing complexity of mixing careers and motherhood, 25 years after women entered the professional work force en masse. Even for women with the best possible situations—college degrees, good jobs, financial strength—navigating between work and children is rough.

"The real crunch is for women in their thirties," said Andrew J. Cherlin, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins University. "Their biological clocks are forcing them to have children at the same time that many high-powered employers want them to work many hours."

The underlying problem, many researchers suggest, is that society is still not designed for working parents—with little job flexibility, a work culture that often expects 50- or 60-hour weeks, poor quality child care and school hours that are at odds with office hours.

The cross tension leaves many women "simply cobbling together individual solutions," family historian Stephanie Coontz said. "What is absolutely clear is that families are very, very stressed, and women are struggling with questions about if they can quit, when they can quit and how they can cut back."

In Washington, where work is nearly a religion, the anxiety can be pronounced. Here, long hours are ordinary. Even at home, cellular phones ring, fax machines deliver, reports pile up. It's hard for a parent to be a good workaholic.

At the same time, stepping out of the career loop can present its own difficulties.

"Some people stand up and beat their chests and say being home is all they ever dreamed of," said Dita Zapata, 39, a mother of two who worked 12 years in international finance. "But I would say eight-tenths of us are conflicted. We are happy to be able to be at home, but we also wonder if there is



BY BILL O'LEARY—THE WASHINGTON POST

Debbie Spriggs holds daughter Elizabeth, 2 months, while listening to a lecture at the Wednesday Morning Group.

a better way to put this puzzle together."

In some small way, that's where the Wednesday Morning Group comes in. The idea is to transcend the limits of home, boost the voltage, zap the brain. The group has dubbed itself "the mother's sanity pill." It may not end the enduring conflict, but it can make the home choice more fulfilling.

"Our main goal," Joan Wolf-Chiaverini said, "is intellectual stimulation, for at least one hour a week." Wolf-Chiaverini is the group's chairwoman, a warm, witty mother who worked as an assistant vice president in real estate and who has presided as the group's numbers have swelled sevenfold over four years.

There are other mothers groups in the region—a thriving subculture of them, in fact—but the Wednesday group stands out for its focus on mothers' needs and its high-profile lecturers. It also does summer field trips with children, but the weekly lectures—which members pay \$60 a year to attend—are its mainstay.

"I don't think a group like this could survive somewhere other than Washington," said Sandy Kresch, 37, of Rockville, a mother of two who worked as an environmental lawyer. "I don't think they could get those kind of speakers, and I don't think they could attract this many people."

The Wednesday women are lawyers, congressional staff members, policy analysts, engineers, scientists, art curators, lobbyists, researchers, real estate agents, social workers, press secretaries and computer programmers. Some work part time now. Most expect to work down the road.

Some always imagined themselves at home, like Beth Fenton, 39, a former home economics teacher from Bethesda who has taken pleasure in creating a preschool-like environment for her three children. "I think this is the most important job I will ever do," she said.

Others, including Kimberly Abod, 33, of Bethesda, tried to stay in the work force, but found her 80-hour-a-week job as a financial controller could not be downsized nearly enough. "I just started seeing everything crumbling down around me," she said. "It was one of those jobs that just didn't go with having two children."

While many Wednesday women are well off, some are like Bethany Karn, 35, of Takoma Park, who worked as an administrator of a nonprofit group and declares herself "a militant feminist stay-at-home mom." A mother of three, Karn shops at garage sales, cooks rice and beans, tutors children in French and barely affords gas money for her weekly drive to Bethesda.

"It's hard to manage a household on one income," she said. "It's a stretch. We pay the mortgage, and there's very little left."

But she has become a regular at Wednesday lectures since 1996, when she attended her first and "felt like I was surrounded by a group of Hillary Clintons," she said. "The women were so smart and well put-together. . . . It's like your best college classes. It gives my brain a massage."

At 10 a.m. every Wednesday, she and others gather at the Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church, in an intimate chapel nestled in the trees near Rock Creek Park. Women sit side by side in cushioned pews, eyes fixed on a simple lectern, as sunlight floods into the room through rectangular panes of handblown glass.

This is where Pam Sherman recalls cuddling her newborn infant as a Pulitzer-winning poet, Henry Taylor, read from his works. "It was a seminal moment," she said. "I thought, I'm expanding my mind and breast-feeding my son at the same time."

It is also where Edward Gero, an award-winning Shakespearean actor, came to deliver a lecture one Wednesday and was received by women not only

familiar with the bard's work but also able to discuss the nuances of his more obscure scenes.

On other Wednesdays, the women have heard from Elizabeth Campbell, founder of public television station WETA; David K. Shieler, who wrote "A Country of Strangers: Blacks and Whites in America"; Stanley Greenspan, a prominent child psychiatrist; Andrew Kimbrell, an expert and activist on biotechnology; Neal Barnard, head of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine; McDermott, recent winner of the National Book Award for fiction; and the Right Rev. Jane Holmes Dixon, the second woman in the United States to be elected an Episcopal bishop.

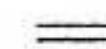
"I think if most people didn't go here, they might be back in the work force because they'd be unhappy," said Kathryn MacDonald, 37, a Chevy Chase mother of two who worked in international sales and marketing. "It's only an hour, but it's your fix for the week."

Not every Wednesday brings a celebrity or cultural expert. Also in the mix are lectures about personal finances, holistic medicine, pastry making and travel with children.

"It can be politics or comedy or anything, but in the process, it keeps you connected to what's going on in the world," said Elizabeth Sadove, 35, who worked as a lawyer and lobbyist and quit a job she loved when her nanny left and her husband's job began requiring more travel.

Tellingly, perhaps, one of the best-remembered Wednesday speakers is Iris Krasnow, author of "Surrendering to Motherhood," a book devoted to her decision to leave her job as a globe-trotting journalist to stay home and care for her sons.

"It was as if this woman had written this book that represented our collective experience," said Mollie Morgan, 32, who has a 2-year-old and who made her career as a financial analyst. "People were sitting there in tears."



In its fourth decade, the Wednesday Morning Group reflects how women's lives have changed. It started in 1962 with 20 churchgoing homemakers who met Wednesdays and invited a speaker on alternate weeks.

"We didn't have speakers like they have today," recalled Wanda Van Goor, a founding member. "We didn't know anybody in those high echelons. We thought we were doing well when we got a child psychologist to talk to us."

With the onset of the modern women's movement, the Wednesday group changed. By the 1970s, careers became more often a possibility. In the career-blazing 1980s, the group dwindled to eight women, said Peg Petersen, 70, an early chairwoman.

"That was the period when people criticized you if you stayed home," she said. "You were supposed to go to work."

By the mid-1990s, as word of lectures spread, the Wednesday women—and their aspirations—multiplied. Most of those who joined had college degrees and careers. They were older. They were making choices.

Increasingly they have sought lecturers who were journalists, authors, policy wonks, political operators and theater people—all without paying speaking fees. Half of their guests arrive thanks in part to a member's connec-

High-Voltage Mothers Group Aims To Be 'Sanity Pill' for Its Members

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tions. But the women don't shrink at making cold calls.

"We're not inviting Madeleine Albright because we realize a war is going on," said MacDonald, who helps recruit speakers. "But if there wasn't, I think we would."

One reason the women succeed is that they know how. They have rules. They divvy up duties. They get volunteers. "Remember, being part of the board is something you can put on your resume," JoAnne King, 41, chairwoman-elect, brightly reminded the group one day. Pausing, she advised: "You might not want to say you were . . . snack chairman."

In the ritual of coming together, a good many women have made friends.

"Sometimes there is great contention between mothers who stay at home and mothers who work, and it's just good to be around people who are like you," said Engle, the former CIA analyst. "I'm glad to be around other women who have made the same choice as I and still have their brains and their wits."

They are women like Susan Clayton, 34, an aerospace engineer who has a master's degree and never considered not using it. But after she had her son, Daniel, and went back to work, she found the combination distressing.

At work, she saw the best promotions and raises going to men who could work long hours because they had wives at home caring for their children and seeing to family needs. In her own life, she saw too many responsibilities, too little time.

Her nanny spent 50 hours a week with her son; she spent just 30. Even so, it was hard to downshift on the job. She felt guilty leaving the office at 5 p.m., sometimes in mid-meeting—and yet when she arrived home, she felt she had been gone too long.

Clayton cut back to a schedule of four days, losing pay and nearly all her benefits, but found that change unsatisfying. She had just a few extra hours with her infant because of constant household errands.

Finally, she quit. "It was the best choice I made," she said, rocking her second child, Matthew, 3 months old, in her Bethesda kitchen. "They do so much from 7:30 in the morning to 6 at night, and you miss it."

Clayton recalls lying in her backyard with Daniel, watching leaves fall from the trees and giggling about which ones might hit their faces.

"That might have happened on a Saturday when I was home," she said. "But I might have missed that."

On the other hand, Clayton still thinks about resuming part-time work. "I go back and forth every couple of days," she said. "It's a constant struggle."

One April morning, 70 mothers like Clayton were on hand to listen as Wheelock, the ABC producer, agonized about trends in news coverage—to make stories shorter, to play looser with facts, to prey on victims of tragedy. He told them about his present position, producing "Good Morning America" with Charles Gibson and Diane Sawyer. The Wednes-

day women were interested.

Then he struck them in the heart. He talked about an ABC correspondent covering the presidential scandal who was on assignment and away from her children. After a period of days, her son, 5 or 6 at the time, finally saw his mother's face on the news.

"Hi, Mommy," the little boy said to the television.

He kissed the screen.

There were tears in the chapel, a soft shaking of heads. Some mothers in the crowd knew the correspondent. But more of them knew the tug between two worlds, made achingly vivid, beheld instead of lived.