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The No Guilt Book Club Celebrates 10 Years Together

By A. K. Carroll



No Guilt Book Club Members, back row, from left: Sandra Smith, Pat Partridge, Carol Pitman, Bettyann Pepper, Mary D'amante, and Sara Lazarus; front row: JoAnn Webber, Polly Olson, Diane Wilt and Char Powers.
Photo A. K. Carroll

When this reporter recently walked into the home of Lafayette resident Diane Wilt, a kettle was boiling and a tray of goodies was set out near a circle of five lively women who bantered back and forth, sharing stories about their families and their personal lives, discussing topics that ranged from recycling to living alone to technology to disabilities. Their established purpose was a literary discussion, but it was clear from the onset that after 10 years together, the women in this group form more than just a book club.

The No Guilt Book Club, supported by Lafayette Senior Services, began with a seed of hope planted by Wilt back in 2004. "I was in another book group that I'd been in for 35 years when we decided that we needed something at the senior center," said Wilt, who currently serves as the moderator of the group. "Two people joined right away and in the beginning it was a little rocky. I wasn't sure it was going to go."

In time the group grew, and today what started as a monthly book discussion has transformed into a loving community.

"It's really a women's group," said member Carol Pitman.

"Everybody enjoys everybody," added member Pat Partridge.

Wilt noted that there are a number of women in the book club who have never been in a group of any kind, much less one where they are invited to share their opinions and talk about their feelings. In the years that they have been meeting the women have celebrated major birthdays, children's marriages and the birth of grandchildren, and have been there for one another through the death of loved ones, memory loss, moving and illness.

"It's very supportive," Wilt added, recounting the story of a group member who can no longer make meetings after taking a fall and moving into assisted living. Other members of the group still make an effort to keep in touch and to visit.

The club has a policy on mandatory reading, which isn't mandatory at all. "I would like people to be able to say, even if they haven't read [the book], something about it," remarked Wilt.

"You don't have to tell your age and you don't have to read the book if you don't want to," said Pitman. "It's the 'no guilt' book club. It's a very accepting group. If you have an opinion you can share it."

Most of the group members are in their 70s and 80s, making them, "the 'oldest' book club in Lafayette," according to Partridge. All of the members have different life experiences to share - from raising children in the Midwest to teaching elementary school in Oakland to modeling in San Francisco. Yet even after 10 years of meeting together, the women are still learning about one another.

"We've had so many years that all of us have lived and these wonderful rich lives," said Wilt. "It all comes out [in our discussions]."

The group meets the second Monday of the month at the Lafayette Community Center, and many of the women show up early or stay late in order to chat with one another and catch up on the past month. The conversations often veer in unexpected directions, but always begin with

whichever book the group has chosen for the month.

"Our book choices are very eclectic," said Wilt. "Biographies, fictions, classics, 'The Scarlet Letter,' a mystery, Steinbeck." Sometimes the women will read several books on the same topic (such as World War II) before taking a completely different direction.

Wilt doesn't have a record of titles, but in 10 years of meeting the group has read close to 120 books.

"We did not do 'Fifty Shades of Grey,'" assured Powers.

Interested in Joining a Book Club?

In an effort to both offer enough space and to establish the sort of intimacy that these women have come to value, the "No Guilt Book Club" was capped at 16 members and is currently closed. But if the idea of joining a book club piques your interest, there are plenty to choose from in the Lamorinda area, including Lafayette Senior Service's "As the Page Turns" Book Club held from 1 to 2:30 p.m. on the third Tuesday of each month at the Lafayette Community Center. There are also clubs for youth, teen and adult readers throughout the area. Check out your local library for details.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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