

The Red Hat Society in East Dallas

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Bye-Bye Bridge Club

by Kris Scott

This over-50 crowd is breaking the mold of what it means to 'act your age'

Carla Kerr was fond of pairing purple clothes with red hats. But she couldn't understand why people kept asking her the same question whenever she wore them.

"Are you one of those Red Hat Society ladies?" they'd ask.

"I finally said, 'What is this Red Hat Society?' And the lady told me, 'Just get on internet, and you'll find out all about it,'" Kerr says.

So she did just that, discovering that the RHS is a group of women who have a few things in common: They're all over 50, they wear purple and red when they get together, and they like, as they put it, "acting their age."

Still, Kerr says, she wasn't all that interested in becoming involved. Though nearing retirement, she was still working, active in her church and served as a volunteer in many capacities, including For the Love of the Lake.

"I really didn't need it to fill anything," she says of the Society. But her husband, Doug, urged her on.

"He said, 'This sounds like something that's right up your alley. I think you need to do this.'"

So she did, and shortly after becoming involved in one chapter, decided to start her own — called Classic Elegance Red Hatters — with about 12 of her friends. There are now about 36 members.

But just what is a Red Hatter? Four years ago, two women in California started the Society. Sue Ellen Cooper gave her friend, Linda Murphy, a red hat and a copy of a poem by Jenny Joseph entitled "Warning," about getting older and wearing purple.

According to Red Hat legend, the gift was received with such enthusiasm that Cooper soon gave similar gifts to more of her friends. The women began wearing their "regalia," as it's now known, out in public and, just that simply, the first chapter of the Red Hat Society was born.

What's amazing is the wildfire-like rapidity with which the group has spread. There are now more than 16,000 chapters, totaling nearly 300,000 members. There are Red Hatters in every state and about 20 different countries. In Dallas alone, there are more than 20 chapters, including Kerr's. This month, the third annual national RHS convention meets in Grapevine April 14-18.

What has made this group so popular with the over-50 crowd?

"These women have given to their families, their husbands, their churches and charities. We've done all the volunteer work," says Kerr, who, as the founder of her chapter, is known as the Queen Mother.

"And, in the Red Hat Society, we don't do any of that. We just go and have a good time.