

It's also an opportunity to break the mold of what people expect of women over a certain age. Though the women get together for lunch, shopping and other tame excursions, they also do things such as go to pajama parties with Elvis impersonators.

Classic Elegance member Janet Smith does admit some chapters' members are crazier than others. At the pajama party, she says, "some of the women really got carried away. He was probably thinking, 'Oh my god, here's my mother and my grandmother...'" she says with a laugh, but quickly adds: "But God could he *move*. He was an *excellent* Elvis impersonator."

Gyrating hips aside, shopping is one of the Red Hatters' favorite group activities — Kerr calls it her chapter's "battle cry." They particularly enjoy finding new variation on their favorite color scheme.

"Oh gosh, I don't know," says Kerr when asked how many red hats she owns, but then sheepishly admits: "I probably have 25 or more, and probably that many purple outfits. It's just awful."

In fact, the regalia is a big part of the fun, as members try to continually come up with new and extravagant combinations.

"Years ago, I discovered that if you wore happy clothes, people responded to them," Smith says. "I don't think I've ever been out in one of my Red Hat outfits that somebody doesn't speak up. And when we are in groups, people just gravitate to us. They want to know: What are we and why are we dressed like this?"

"It's just fun, and so different from our mundane daily world," she says.

But, as much as the Society is a respite from everyday existence, it also helps members deal with just that. Many Red Hatters refer to it as a "sisterhood," and serious subjects are often dealt with on the society's web site. Kerr says membership is particularly meaningful for women who are widowed.

"They're getting out and doing things they wouldn't necessarily do by themselves," she says. "It's hard to make yourself go to a museum or a play or even to the Arboretum if you don't have somebody to share it with. We try to plan things women wouldn't normally go to unless they had somebody to go with them.

"It's a phenomenal thing," she says. "And it shows you what a need there was for something like this where women could get together and have fun."

For information about the Red Hat Society, visit www.redhatsociety.org.