

Greenwich Retired Men's Association turns 60

Anne W. Semmes; Published Friday, October 3, 2014

Every Wednesday morning, the good fellows of the Retired Men's Association gather --150 or more -- in the grand Fellowship Hall of the First Presbyterian Church atop Greenwich Avenue. At 10 a.m., members start their weekly meeting with the Pledge of Allegiance, followed by a song or two -- or three.

"It's a Grand Old Flag," "There is Nothing like a Dame" or "If You Knew Susie," etc. You get the picture.

Next, RMA President Bob Phillips gives a club news update: who has returned from where, who is new, who has gone on to that other shore. Then Chuck Standard gives the sick list with numbers and addresses of ailing members so they can be visited.

Next comes a highlight of the meeting -- a weekly guest speaker. The RMA, which is celebrating its 60th year in Greenwich, has a knack for landing quality speakers to address the group. One week, it was author Jay Tunney talking about his book "The Prizefighter and the Playwright," a look at the relationship between the author's father, boxer Gene Tunny, and literary giant Bernard Shaw. Another week it could be a former U.S. senator or a titan of industry.

But it's not singing old standards or the caliber of weekly speakers that makes the RMA so popular with retirees.

"The RMA gives me a sense of community," said member Bernard Schneider.

Schneider had been living in Greenwich for 10 years before he discovered the group in a newspaper article. The first meeting he attended, he said, was like "going on a blind date." Call it love at first sight.

Schneider is now indispensable as board member, publicity director and occasional scribe for the weekly Cigar Box Bulletin that can be found on the RMA website that also features videos of their speakers, a service kindly provided by the town's public access Channel 79.

Schneider added that his sense of community is illustrated by the number of community-service hours group members pile up.

"We're volunteering 40,000 hours a year of our time," he says, and that's an average of more than 700 hours a week. "This is a strong volunteer organization," he says, "if needs arise someone volunteers. It's part of the culture of RMA."

For example, he shares a recent Cigar Box Bulletin with its call for volunteers for the AARP Tax Assistance Program, offering free assistance at tax time in Town Hall. "Those are RMA members you see," he says.

"We are the guys at the tables for the Salvation Army Fund drives," he said of his fellow RMA members. "We are delivering Meals on Wheels," noting that RMA President Bob Phillips is also president of that organization.

When someone calls Call-A-Ride to take them to the doctor, he said, "the taxi dispatcher sitting in an office in the First Presbyterian Nursery School building is an RMA member." At Greenwich Hospital, some of those men volunteers wearing their red coat uniforms are, yes, RMA. He added, "We're teaching people to read with Literacy Volunteers." The list goes on.

Ironically, the RMA got its start 60 years ago thanks to a woman's suggestion made. The notable Helen Alvord, who ran the town's Community Chest Drive for years, wanted to introduce a friend's father, a retired sea captain newly moved to town, to other retirees. She shared this with a YMCA staffer, Al Lorenz, who directed adult activities at the Y. Lorenz formed a group of 13 retirees that held its first meeting fireside at the YMCA.

"We believe we have one of the finest such organizations in the country," Lorenz said in a Greenwich Time article back in 1971.

Members still feel that way today.