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Craving Connection? Women's Association of Hilton Head Island dishing up friendship, fun, and opportunities to serve

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We were not meant to be alone in this world. Neuroscience suggests that we are hardwired to interact and connect with one another. While COVID-19 may have caused a temporary power disruption, the Women's Association of Hilton Head Island (WAHHI) is busy restoring the circuits, creating new pathways for connection in socially responsible ways.

According to Tamra Avrit, WAHHI's current president, a key purpose of the organization is to connect women in meaningful ways—through social interaction, educational events, volunteerism, community service projects, and charitable giving. A recent pivot to "hybrid" programs—small group events with the option to participate in person or online—has been the ticket to their ongoing growth and success as they embrace technology and find new ways to continue working and playing together.

"Out of 550 women, some don't want to leave their houses. Others are comfortable going out to a restaurant. You have to cover the waterfront with the programming," Avrit said. In spite of current social distancing challenges, WAHHI, founded in February of 1961, now over 500 members strong, has been quick to shift gears without losing sight of their goals.

Zooming in on the present

Presenting an author series this past spring, WAHHI tested the virtual waters with Zoom, starting in May with NY Times bestselling author Mary Alice Monroe. "That was our proof of concept," Avrit said. "Was Zoom going to work with our membership?" The answer was clearly yes when over 100 women showed up for the first webinar. WAHHI went on to book a series of authors and continues with a turnout of 80-plus remote attendees each month.

This fall's chef series has been equally popular, offering both in-person and online options. "People just really want to be together," Avrit said. "These events allow small groups (25 or so) to get together at a restaurant and to meet and greet each other in a socially distanced way." Members who are uneasy attending in person have been enjoying the events via Zoom, with participating restaurants providing to-go boxes, she explained.

Now that the ladies are Zooming like pros, spring programming is aligned with some of the environmental and cultural parts of the organization's mission, and interest groups are meeting online as well, Avrit said. "We're all learning new skills this year. Who would have thought we would have this capability?"

The organization's four annual luncheons have also been reimagined. Typically held in hotel ballrooms and attracting hundreds of attendees, this year's public gathering restrictions presented a challenge. The September meeting and sixtieth anniversary kickoff was held outdoors at Coastal Discovery Mary Ann Peoples Pavilion, picnic style, and Zoomed as well. In December, WAHHI will celebrate community by hosting a dine-about at Shelter Cove Towne Centre in support of local restaurants and retail merchants.

"We're trying different things!" Avrit said. "We're making an effort to meet our members wherever they are and in their own way. We need to be socially distanced, but we don't need to be distant."

Honoring the past, looking to the future

As WAHHI embarks upon its sixtieth year, the organization has partnered with the Heritage Library to digitize news clippings, photographs, and other literature to commemorate and preserve its history and legacy. Plans are in place for a celebration of history at the February meeting to be held at the Heritage Library, where this year's Charitable Fund grants will be awarded.

April looks to the future with the fortieth Youth Community Service Awards being presented, followed by a style show featuring athleisure wear (a far cry from WAHHI's first fashion show in 1967 highlighting pantyhose and furs). Limited in-person attendance will be offered with a virtual alternative.

If it's connection you're craving, WAHHI offers Lowcountry women a home for fun and friendship along with the satisfaction of serving others. "This is a way to enrich our lives—to cultivate new friends, to give back to the community we love, and to make the world a better place," Avrit said. "Won't you join us?" □

WAHHI invites all women who live on Hilton Head Island, in the Town of Bluffton, on Daufuski Island and in those communities that lie south and east of the intersection of Hwy 170 and Highway 278, with direct access to Hwy 278 or access via feeder roads that lie within the boundaries of the Okatie and May Rivers to become members. To learn more, please visit wahhi.org.