

# Small but Mighty

## Chapters use small interest groups to strengthen friendships and introduce potential new members to the Sisterhood

by Debbie Clason, Coordinator of Membership Development

The local coffee shop in Flagstaff, Arizona, was already doing a brisk carry-out business that morning when members of Chapter AT's Gal Pals dropped in for their monthly Wednesday get together. The first sisters to arrive pushed two small, circular tables together, then added more as others drifted in. Soon, 12 women were chatting happily, playing a P.E.O. version of musical chairs as they shifted frequently to talk to someone new. Guests included a young unaffiliate who dropped by with her two small children, and a friend of one of the members who had recently moved to the area from England.



**From the left:** Catherine Sickafoose, Jean White, Sheryll Gibson, Chapter AT, Arizona

Laurie Cosolito, the small group's originator, learned the value of achieving friendship goals through small groups from participation in another organization. "I can never adequately explain what a difference it made in my life and my increased commitment," she said.

Gal Pals has made a difference in the life of Chapter AT, too. Since its beginning three years ago, the chapter has initiated three members and welcomed four transfers from the friendships they've developed on those informal Wednesday mornings. Laurie chose Wednesday morning for the meeting time because that's the day the retail circulars appear in the local newspaper. "I thought sisters might like to stop for a cup of coffee before they headed out to shop."

In the beginning, only two to three members attended. Today, as many as 15 gather, making time to share a cup of coffee before immersing

themselves in the rest of their day—whether they're heading to the store, swim class or down the highway to visit a neighboring town. That's impressive, considering 17-20 members typically attend business meetings.

Not every chapter uses small interest groups to

introduce friends and relatives to P.E.O. Chapter F, Honolulu, Hawaii, uses small interest groups to give sisters in their large chapter a more intimate opportunity to form deep friendships. The chapter, with close to 50 members, is too large for many members to accommodate

in their homes. Because of their geography, many members spend considerable time visiting family on the Mainland while retaining their membership in Chapter F. Twenty to 30 regularly attend chapter meetings.

Unlike Chapter AT's Gal Pals, small group interest in Chapter F was immediate. Close to 15 members regularly attend book group. The group has read and discussed more than 30 books together; one of the authors gave a program at a recent meeting. Ten members participate in Oscarettes, a group of sisters who attend movies together, then meet afterward for fellowship and to discuss the movie. President Carole Hickerson says the chapter also has a very active bridge group and is currently discussing the possibility of forming a hiking group for those who are interested in exploring the beautiful Hawaiian landscapes.

"Our groups were successful immediately," Carole said. "Meetings are structured; small groups are casual. Small groups give our sisters a better chance to know each other."

Ann Osborn, Chapter E, Anchorage, Alaska, started a handiwork small group in her chapter because she feels it's difficult to talk to everyone at meetings. "I thought this would be a great way for us to know each other better and be more supportive," she said. "Everyone seemed to be ready to do something more in depth to get to know each other. We've had such fun." The group meets once a month at Ann's house because of her central location.



Members of Chapter E, Anchorage, handiwork small group from the left: Terry Harding, Ann Osborn, Alyson Dickson, Marci Everson

Participants, ranging between three to seven each time, bring a sandwich and a knitting, quilting or other handiwork project to work on.

Together, the group made bags to sell for Founders' Day with the scraps and pieces they traded back and forth. "We've made money from some of our projects but that's definitely not the purpose," Ann said. "The group has brought us

trade plants and other gardening tips during the long Alaska winter.

All three chapters enjoy the close relationships they foster with their sisters outside of the business meetings. Hedy Thomas, a former unaffiliate who moved from California, says she appreciated the Gal Pals coffee group as an informal way to become acquainted

closer together as a chapter. Our greatest success has been the support and encouragement we've given to each other for different projects."

Chapter E's other small interest groups include those for coffee and lunch. The chapter is also in the process of developing an indoor gardening group where members will

with a small group of members. "Meetings are all business and sometimes it's difficult to get to know everyone. The coffee was a great way to get to know sisters and develop friendships. It helped me decide which chapter to transfer to."

Cindy Pickett, a school teacher for 30 years, was unable to attend the daytime meetings during her career. The summertime Gal Pals coffees allowed her to stay connected to her P.E.O. sisters until she retired and was able to return to active chapter life.

And while the groups are generally organized by one particular member, nothing is really written in stone. Laurie, Ann and Carole say flexibility is the key to success.

"One of the reasons we've been successful is because we haven't kept a rigid schedule," Carole said.

"I've never wanted anyone to feel an obligation," Ann said. "It's just there for those that want to do it. If you don't come, we don't hold it against you. But I do make very good coffee!" ☀

## How to develop small interest groups in your chapter

### Step 1. Decide to try small interest groups in your chapter.

- Elect a group leader to coordinate this process for the chapter.
- Determine what kinds of small interest groups you will have. Consider circulating a simple survey to identify common member interests, such as books, golf, bridge, etc.
- Using the results of the survey, create several small interest groups.

### Step 2. Recruit members for the small interest groups.

- Promote and encourage these relationship-building activities during Suggestions for the Good of the Chapter.
- Identify which individuals are organizing and planning activities for each small interest group.
- Encourage members to notify those individuals if they are interested in participating in a specific small interest group.

### Step 3. Begin meeting in small interest groups.

- Set general guidelines at your first meeting.
  - a. Determine when and where you will meet. Setting a consistent time and place for meeting makes it easy for small interest group members to plan their calendars in advance.
  - b. Encourage all members to make a commitment to attend as regularly as possible. It is more difficult to form lasting relationships if sisters only see each other occasionally.
  - c. Decide who will be in charge of organizing the group's activities and how long her leader ship will last.

### Step 4. Celebrate the strong relationships formed during the year.

- Build on your success and make plans for the next year!
- Encourage members to consider participating in a different small interest group next year so they have the opportunity to enjoy deeper relationships with even more sisters.