



Hanging out with the ROMEOS

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February 19, 2011 11:02 p.m. EST



'Retired old men eating out'

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Meet the ROMEOS (retired old men eating out)
- No dues, officers or requirements
- These gentlemen have plenty of stories to share

Gainesville, Virginia (CNN) -- When Earl Stinson started receiving radiation treatments for prostate cancer, he knew where to go for advice. He turned to Lindy Atkins, a cancer survivor and fellow "ROMEO."

"ROMEO (retired old men eating out) groups spring up all over the United States," Stinson tells CNN. "They have no organization, no members, no requirements, no dues and no officers, and if you try to organize it, you have a riot on your hands."

Across the country, men like Stinson and Atkins are joining the commitment-free club. These ROMEOS vacation in Florida, play golf during the week, and when they come together, they're just looking for fun. What it takes to become a real ROMEO is all in the name.

"No requirements," says Stinson. "Nothing required of us other than coming in and eating breakfast and talking about whatever you want to talk about."

Like other social networks, the ROMEO Club uses Facebook to recruit and advertise its many chapters across the country in nearly every state. The men come together for the fun of dining out. And after regular meetings, their fellowship is built by a bond that comes from decades of experience.

"These men, we all have been through the fire. We've raised families. We can share with each other things that concern us, things that concern us about our children, our grandchildren," says Stinson. Stinson, a 73-year-old retired real estate executive, found his local ROMEO chapter about five years ago. For the past couple years, he and dozens of other retired men meet each other, punctually, at 9 a.m every other Friday, for breakfast at an IHOP in Gainesville, Virginia, a town about 30 miles west of the nation's capital.

These men know how to eat, requesting several "all you can eat" pancake orders, a couple of senior omelets and a senior short stack.

Nothing (is) required of us other than coming in and eating breakfast and talking about whatever you want to talk about.

--Earl Stinson, ROMEO

Exceptions are made. A couple of men, among the 21 having breakfast on this particular Friday morning, are still a few years from retirement. The youngest, Tom Engleman, is 58 and continues to work as a video photographer. The oldest, Elmer Hensley, will celebrate his 90th birthday in April. "Elmer's 89 years old," says Stinson. "Yesterday, he needed transportation down to Falls Church. The doctor and one of the people in the group took him down there. But that's what we do. We stick together."

Hensley worked for 35 years as a butcher and was born a few miles away from where the men now meet for breakfast. Many of the other ROMEOs live nearby at a retirement community. Stinson says the men help each other, especially some who have recently lost their wives. All the men, married or widowed, are happy to offer some advice about relationships.

"I've been married 46 years, and I would say the secret of a happy marriage is giving to each other," says retiree Fred Sheep.

And since the club's name references the famous Shakespeare play, what's a ROMEO without a Juliet?

"We've been married 43 years because she was a beautiful young lady and I said, 'I can't let someone else have her. I have to have her.' And we have had four children and six grandchildren since then," says Joseph Romeo Jr.

Romeo Jr. is also amused by the coincidence of being part of a club that bears his name. Like a true ROMEO, his wife dines with him, saying she won't let him leave her side. "He's too good-looking," she says.

"When the ROMEOs started meeting, a couple of the ladies said, 'That's not fair. There has to be a Juliet.' Now we offered to tell them what the letters Juliet stood for and they didn't accept ours," jokes Stinson.

Next month, these Virginia ROMEOs plan on taking their Juliets out for a date night. Stinson says they plan on visiting the Lazy Susan Dinner Theater in Woodbridge, Virginia, with their wives and

some widowed ladies. On the agenda for that evening is a play based on a 1939 Agatha Christie mystery novel.

Many of the retirees say they learned about the club either through church, their retirement community or by people like Stinson who actively recruit new ROMEOs.

During Friday's two-hour breakfast, a waitress tells Stinson a man at another table eating alone would like to learn more about the ROMEOs.

Stinson steps away from his club, slides into the booth opposite the man and begins his pitch.

"If you'd like to come back and join us, we'd love to have you."

CNN's Ken Tuohey contributed to this report.