

# LADIES STAY IN THE 'LOOP'

Community connections and support strong in one Cherry Hill neighborhood

By Sally Friedman :: For the Courier-Post

Back in 1989, when Marilyn Hailperin and her husband were looking for a home, they visited one for sale in the Fox Hollow section of Cherry Hill.

The owners of that home told Marilyn there was something quite special about the neighborhood. And it wasn't just the lovely homes, the mature trees or the good schools.

"She told me about the Harrowgate Loop Dinners as a definite selling point for the home," recalls Hailperin. "She saw these gatherings as a selling point for the neighborhood — and she was right."

The Hailperins bought that home, and Marilyn Hailperin began going to the "Loop Ladies Dinners."

What she experienced is still going on, and still drawing together women neighbors in a world in which many don't even know their immediate neighbors, let alone those down the block.

The concept, which is believed to have begun in the early 1970s, when the



Brenda Korach (left), who keeps members informed of meetings and other neighborly concerns, holds a dish at a recent get-together. Feinhals, the evening's host, explained the group's laid-back approach to dinner: 'Anyone brings anything, and somehow it all works out.'



Neighbors (from left) Julie Johnson, Jane Mayer, Katie Dunn, Becky DePaul and Kirti Doshi enjoy their 'Loop Ladies Dinners.' One rule for the intergenerational group: No husbands allowed. Men would change the vibe, they say, and the men don't seem to mind a bit.

## Ladies

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homes were built, was to bring together new neighbors so they could not just come to know one another and each other's kids, but also keep an eye out for each other.

No one is certain of the details of those very first days, but it was generally accepted that the get-togethers would be in the afternoons, when most women were at home; that they would be somewhat formal in terms of food and attire; and that soon enough, neighborhood bonds would form.

Decades after, reports Hailperin, a lot has changed and a lot hasn't.

### Casual but organized

New women neighbors are automatically invited to join the group. Most choose to. The current official membership is about 30, with 15 to 20 typically coming to the meetings, which run 10 months a year, not in July and August.

There are no "officers," although the remarkably efficient Brenda Korach, trained in the law and superbly organized, takes on the role of sending out reminders and seeing to it that the group is aware of any neighbors who may need a little support.

"If there's a death or illness, we're there. A few emails, and dinners are sent over, and, if welcome, visits are arranged. We definitely, absolutely care about one another. To us, that's what a neighborhood is all about."

At a recent dinner of the Harrowgate Loop, named for the horseshoe area of this long street in Fox Hollow, there were, indeed, indications of that caring. The women were clearly delighted to see



Donna Green (from left), Amy Drezner and Brenda Korach enjoy a recent dinner of the Harrowgate Loop, named for the horseshoe area of their street in Fox Hollow. JODI SAMSEU/COURIER-POST

one another at this monthly ritual. Nearly all of the women work now, and don't see one each other in the neighborhood nearly as often as the women who initially met during the day did.

They are a diverse group — initially, the afternoon Loop women were largely homemakers with young children who put a lot more emphasis on the food they brought to this "covered dish" monthly get-together than the women of 2013 do.

Host for the recent gathering was Maria Feinhals, one of the early residents — she arrived 31 years ago, and reared two daughters on Harrowgate. Recently, she retired from her career in a medical office.

Totally relaxed at the start time — 7 p.m. on a weekday night with a lovely cloth on the table and disposable tableware — Feinhals accepted the food that was brought by

the guests: "Anyone brings anything," Feinhals explained, "and somehow it all works out."

### Connection is focus

The host hastened to clarify that food is not the main event at these monthly meetings. Connection, home to home, woman to woman, is what it's all about.

And that was soon obvious as hugs were exchanged, and so were instant conversations among women, most casually dressed, clearly at various stages of life, all using the shorthand patois of people who know each other well, but always need to catch up.

"That's really what it's about," said Dr. Kirti Doshi, who arrived at Harrowgate in 1976 with a son, 5, and a daughter, 3. A retired anesthesiologist, Doshi is well-known for introducing her neighbors to exotic new foods, and for being a deeply car-

ing neighbor.

For Jane Mayer, who came along only eight years ago, the women of the Loop were initially lifelines to information about the community, schools, recreation and the like. A Ph.D candidate at Rutgers-Camden in Childhood Studies, she and her husband were transplants from Maryland with a young daughter and an older stepson. Her research often took her away, sometimes for long periods of time.

"But recently, even after I was away for six months, stepping back into Loop dinners was absolutely hassle-free. It was as if I hadn't even been away," Mayer said.

Mayer, like other women, explained that there is a special bond among them that somehow avoids that pitfall of adolescence — and beyond: cliques and gossip.

"That's just not who we are," says Mayer. "We see each other just enough,



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“That’s just not who we  
are,” says Mayer. “We see  
each other just enough,

but not too much. We’re  
interested in each other as  
people, and we under-  
stand that there may be al-  
liances within the larger  
group, and that’s fine.”

For Mayer, who may be  
moving soon for family  
and career reasons, the  
Harrowgate Loop has  
been a joyous part of a  
busy life. “We all have ob-  
ligations, but we make  
time for each other.”

### No boys allowed

Husbands? Not invit-  
ed.

The consensus: This is  
a form of Girls’ Night Out,  
and men would change  
the vibe. Additional con-  
sensus: The men don’t  
mind a bit.

What was obvious at  
the dinner on Harrowgate  
was that not too many of  
these women are pushing  
strollers these days. But  
there are exceptions.

A new member, who  
was not present, is await-  
ing her second baby. And  
representing that same  
contingent was Katie  
Dunn, 28, mother of a tod-  
dler, who was frank to ad-  
mit that she came “ner-  
vously” to a group dinner  
when she was first invit-  
ed.

“I even worried about  
what to wear,” says Dunn,  
who moved into the neigh-  
borhood in 2012 when her  
son, John, was 4 months  
old. “It was such a crazy  
time, and I immediately  
had so much respect for  
the older members who  
really had good advice for  
me, and made me feel so  
welcome.”

Dunn has missed only  
one meeting since.

### Through highs and lows

For members like Amy  
Drezner, a 1989 Harrow-  
gate “veteran,” mother  
and busy tax adviser, life  
seldom slows down. Not  
even the craziness of tax  
season could keep her  
from the recent get-to-  
gether. “Knowing your

neighbors is what makes  
Harrowgate really feel  
like home for us,” she  
says. “We watch out for  
each other’s homes and  
kids and even dogs.”

Most of the women rec-  
ognize that in other neigh-  
borhoods, such connec-  
tions are tenuous at best.  
The story was told of  
South Jersey next-door  
neighbors in Cherry Hill  
who first met on jury duty,  
after living cheek to jowl  
for 10 years.

“That’s not what we’re  
about,” says Drezner.  
“Some of us celebrate life  
events together, and some  
of us may just take a walk  
together, but it really mat-  
ters that this is truly a  
community within a com-  
munity.”

How much it matters  
was understood recently  
when Harrowgate Loop  
resident Marie Pettersen  
had a recent bout with ill-  
ness and surgery.

“I’ve loved this neigh-  
borhood, and the wonder-  
ful people who live here,”  
said Pettersen. “I went to  
my first dinner 25 years  
ago, and those years went  
by like the blink of an eye.  
We’ve supported each other  
through highs and lows  
— I feel so fortunate to be  
on the Loop,” she said of  
the support she received.

Perhaps no one demon-  
strates that gratitude  
more than Julianne John-  
son.

An attorney, Johnson,  
her husband and three  
daughters have lived on  
Harrowgate Loop for  
nearly 25 years. But in  
two different houses.

“Seven years ago, we  
realized we needed a big-  
ger house,” says Johnson.  
“So we moved into one  
eight houses down from  
our original house.”

Johnson sees it as a  
simple, prudent decision.

“I love the neighbor-  
hood,” said Johnson. “I  
love the Loop dinner tra-  
dition. So here I am — still  
happy proud to live here  
and be at this dinner!”