



San Diego Sisterhood

Five women celebrate their friendship every day

by Ondine Brooks Kuraoka

They're spunky. They're beautiful. And they've found the pot of gold in their connection with each other. This is the story of five women and their evolving friendship.

Friends walk with us from one stage of life to the next, or, with rare fortune, from one stage to the very end.

The Beginning

In August of 2002, Elaine Ramsey, then living in Lakeside, invited an entire Mommy and Me class to her house for a Pampered Chef party. Little did she know, that night was a turning point for five women, including Elaine.

There was food, laughter and an easy feeling of camaraderie. Several women looked around the room and felt something remarkable brewing. The lucky ladies were Kim Plale, 38, of El Cajon, Melanie Carter, 30, of La Mesa, Karrie Anton, 27, of Santee, Amanda Pontzius, 32, also of Santee, and Elaine, 25.

“That night was the building block of our friendship,” says Melanie. “We decided to make it a ritual.”

Friday Nights

They planned to get together every Friday night. Whether it was a candle party or just letting the kids play together, Friday nights were the time to catch up and reconnect.

“Being moms or just women getting together, it was special to us,” Melanie says.

Getting together every Friday night, the kids formed their first real friendships also. Watching them play and grow added another dimension to the bond the women felt. The five moms are steadfast aunties to the ten children of the group, rejoicing in each child's milestones. “They all call me Aunt Mo,” Amanda says. “I consider them part of my family.”

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One key to the longevity of the group's routine get-togethers is the common expectation of a casual, carefree evening. "You might show up at someone's house with a bag of chips and everyone had brought chips," Kim says. "Or you'd just scrounge through your freezer for food. No one cleans their house before having each other over."

The group also has an understanding that they don't have to do everything together. "Two people will go do something together; we do avenue off," Kim says. "People get closer depending on what's going on in their lives."

Saran Wrap and Cartwheels

The hallmark of their friendship is a comfortable zaniness. These ladies can let their guard down, getting as silly as they want to be together.

"While the kids played sometimes we did our hair," Melanie says, "We'd dye it or cut it and do our make-up. My hair has been all different colors." Another time, they saran-wrapped Kim's bed and toilets while she was out of the house.

One weekend they went to Barona for Karrie's birthday. "My favorite memory was acting like 5-year-old boys," says Elaine. "We jumped from the beds and even the dressers. We did cartwheels down the hotel hallway."

"We used hotel pillow cases and did sack races up and down the hallway," Melanie says, laughing. "We also did handstand contests."

Real Friends

When life casts a cold shadow, the warmth of mutual support is just a phone call or visit away. These strong mothers have strong shoulders to help each other bear whatever comes their way.

Melanie, who works as a clerk in a department store in La Mesa, recently lost her grandmother to cancer. Her friends were there each step of the way. The day after her grandmother passed away her friends came over without their kids. "We sat out on the porch and drank wine and they let me let it all out," Melanie says. "We talked about my grandma's life."

Kim is currently studying at Grossmont College and plans to pursue a degree in women's studies. When she broke her foot right before her husband's hip surgery, her friends helped out with babysitting.

"But it's the day-to-day being there that comes to my mind," Kim says. "They've been really good about taking the kids a couple hours so my husband and I could go out to dinner or to a baseball game or even just stay home and watch TV."

Everyone was grateful for the group's coming together for her own reasons. For Karrie, a receptionist at CCM Enterprises in Santee, it coincided with her husband's deployment to Japan. "I used to call my mom and tell her that I finally have real friends. They're real, good, genuine people."

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Elaine's husband is also in the military and the ladies have stood by each other during deployments. "Karrie has always been strong for me," Elaine says. "Her husband was gone for a year; mine was gone for 7 months. She's always understood what it's like."

The Feast of Friendship

Each woman brings her own qualities to the friendship, creating a potluck of strength, courage and creativity.

Amanda, an operating room clerk at Grossmont College, helped Karrie decorate her kids' rooms. "Amanda takes the littlest things and makes them beautiful," says Melanie. "To be part of it and watch her is incredible. She shares vegetables from her garden with us."

"Amanda is grounded," says Kim. "No matter what goes on in our lives, I can talk to her and she will listen without judging. We don't agree on everything; none of us do. But no matter what I talk about, she'll listen."

But Amanda points to Kim as the grounding force. "Kim is the rock that holds us all together," Amanda says. "She's so stable. When we're all spinning out of control, with husbands leaving for Iraq or while I was getting divorced, Kim was always standing in the middle saying, 'We can do it. We can get through this. I'll come and get your kids for a while.' She keeps us grounded and pulls us back in."

Karrie is the one that can make everyone laugh. "She makes us come out of our shells and do things that we would never do otherwise," Melanie says. "She's just goofy. She's probably the one that came up with the sack races."

"Karrie is so vibrant," Kim says. "She has this charisma that everyone is drawn to."

Melanie is regarded for her straightforward nature. "She knows her opinions and that's what I like about her," Kim says. "She's genuine. I respect that; I envy it. She doesn't try to pretend."

"Melanie also wants to take care of everybody," says Amanda. "She takes on so much. She's so strong. She has a humongous heart that embraces everyone."

Elaine's entertaining perspective is prized for being one-of-a-kind. "Elaine makes me look outside the box," says Kim. "She gives me that fresh angle."

Be Yourself

Each of the ladies pointed out how different they are from one another. Intriguingly, their distinct personalities seem to be important ingredients to the glue of their friendship.

"We have different political and religious views," says Elaine. "But it doesn't matter. We've never fought with each other; we can always have a conversation."

"We always blatantly tell each other the truth," says Karrie.

"I think that is what makes the friendship stick together; we have something to discuss," Kim says.

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Elaine Moves Away

A turning point for the group came a year ago when Elaine's husband was transferred to Woodbridge, Virginia.

Memories of Elaine's going away party in December of 2004 bring tears. "One of the hardest things we ever went through was Elaine's going away party," Amanda says. "It was like losing a part of ourselves. I just remember my heart aching that whole day."

"We all knew she was leaving and nobody wanted to say anything," says Kim. "We tried to make it a good party just so we didn't have to think about it. And then it came time for everyone to go back home and we didn't want to go home."

The night was heavy with emotion. The women were not the only ones saying goodbye; their children were also saying goodbye.

"Elaine always called and made sure we had plans for our Friday night," Melanie says. "It's been a year since she moved to Virginia and she's still the one who keeps us all together. She'll call and say, 'Why haven't you guys done anything? I heard that you haven't seen each other for a week and a half.'"

Surprises

Happily, these ladies delight in engineering heartfelt surprises. A few months after Elaine moved, she and Karrie surprised the rest of the gang by planning Elaine's surprise visit to San Diego. The crew then chipped in to fly Elaine out to surprise Karrie for her 30th birthday several months later.

"They brought Elaine to me," says Karrie. "That's when I knew they were my best friends for life."

"It's such an awesome feeling to watch someone be so excited she can't handle it," Melanie says. "The look on Karrie's face was priceless when she walked into the room and Elaine was there."

"Everyone was screaming and crying; it was amazing," says Elaine, now a manager at Yankee Candle Company in Virginia. "After we got over the initial shock that I was there, it was like I'd never left."

"No time passes between us," says Amanda.

Are Your Ears Ringing?

The connection between close friends can be akin to a sixth sense. "We all have such a deep understanding of each other that that we know if something's going on," Amanda says. "Kim will just call me out of the blue and say, 'Are you okay?' And I may be sitting here crying."

That Hormonal Perspective

Friends bridge the phases of our lives, reminding us who we are, who we have been, and who we can be. They help us tune into truth and celebrate the path we are traveling together.

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The closeness we find with our spouses is a transition for most friendships, but it's our friends who help us make sense of our lives. And no matter how much we love the men in our lives, our friendships with other women give us a different perspective and hold a cherished place. Maybe it's as simple as our common hormonal make-up.

As these five ladies look to the future, they see the ongoing embrace of their connection. Karrie's husband is leaving for Iraq in January of 2006 for about eight months. "My friends will be my backbone," says Karrie. "They're my family. They are on my kids' school emergency cards."

Best Friends

"A lot of times you find one good friend," says Amanda. "But it's very rare that you find four best friends."

"Every day when I think about them I know how lucky I am," Elaine says, 1,500 miles away and still close.

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