

Sherri Gardner Howell: Renewing friendships with good folks

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Think for a minute about the common threads that bind you to your friends.

When we are small, the threads can be thin and fragile — being in the same classroom, liking the same music, playing on the same team. Distance and changing tastes can pull that thread just a bit, and it snaps.

As we get older, I think shared experiences bind us to people we like. Proximity and the amount of time spent together figure into the formula but aren't enough on their own to fortify that thread.

When I look at the people whose friendships have been constant and strong in my life, there's always a history of shared experiences. Many of them involve my children because so much of my life is and was centered on them. Some are friends I met at work, where there was seldom a lack of challenges, triumphs and tragedies to weather together. A few go back to the days of pigtails and first boyfriends because there is something deep and lasting between us.

Still, there are a lot of people who I truly "liked" that I would now feel awkward sitting next to at a dinner party for more than 30 minutes.

I recently gathered a group of old friends for a "let's catch up" dinner. I worried that the 10 of us would be finished catching up in 30 minutes and wondering how soon was too soon to leave. The main reason for my worry was that we all really had only one thread that bound us together: We are all former members of the Farragut Jaycees and Jaycettes.

The years my husband and I spent in the Jaycees and Jaycettes were an important time in our lives. We were young, just starting our family and our careers. Being in the Jaycees and finding people with the same interests and in the same places in their lives was wonderful. We did a lot of community service together, learned a lot of leadership skills and had a lot of fun.

Our little group worked hard and did so much back in the 1980s. Being community-minded was different then. We raised money for national charities and local organizations without silent auctions and gala dances. A corporate sponsor wasn't a company that wrote us a check for \$10,000, but one that gave us a discount on hot dogs to sell at Take-a-Break or let us have a table every Saturday in their mall to give out infant car seats to those who couldn't afford them.

We played bingo and held dances for residents of Lakeshore Mental Health Institute. We picked up manure at the mushroom farm and sold it by the truckloads to raise money for Camp Discovery summer camp for children and adults with disabilities. We spent the majority of many Octobers building and hosting haunted houses — for fun and to have money to give local charities.

Still, time passes. Members drifted in and out. Priorities shifted from radiothons for St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital to carnivals for our school PTAs. The whole culture of the

organization nationally changed. Friends we once spent every weekend with floated out of our lives.

At the dinner, however, we were truly happy to see these friends again. We passed around cell phones with pictures of children and grandchildren, tried to sum up the past 20-odd years of our lives, mixed in some happy memories and found that the night went too quickly. The plans to do it again were genuine.

I'm not sure why it turned out that way. I can conclude that we have shared experiences, fun memories and some commonalities that reach beyond our time as Jaycees. In the end, however, I think it's simpler than that.

They were then and still are just good people.

Sherri Gardner Howell may be reached at gardners@tds.net.