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## Clubs

### Girls Just Want to Have Fun

Who Are Those Red Hatters?  
Noelle Robbins



Girls just want to have fun. And one particular group of girls of a “certain age” really wants to have fun. No rules, no responsibilities, no expectations. Just friends and good times. Well, there is one teeny, tiny rule: You may officially join these ladies for pleasure and laughs only when you reach the age of 50. And, to be perfectly honest, there is one important expectation: To participate in group activities, you should be dressed in purple and red. Red hats to be specific.

Meet the Red Hat Society. Maybe you’ve seen groups of these ladies at

social events and swelling the audience on the Price is Right. You’ve been impressed with their light-hearted spirit and what could sometimes be called “flamboyant” behavior. You may have wondered, “Who are these merry, energetic middle-aged women? And how do I join?” On her authorized Web site, Sue Ellen Cooper, Queen Mother of the international movement says, “The Red Hat Society began as the result of a few women deciding to greet middle age with verve, humor and élan. We believe silliness is the comedy relief of life ... Underneath the frivolity we share a bond of affection, forged by common life experiences and a genuine enthusiasm for wherever life takes us next.”

The Red Hat Society was born in 1998, and spreading friend by friend, sister by sister has grown into thousands of chapters in the United States and internationally in 30 countries. There are more than 150 chapters in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. Here in Alameda two “Queen Mums” reign over our own Red Hatters. And while the Island Dames and the Red Hat Society Shady Ladies share much of the upbeat Red Hatter philosophy and giddy adherence to the premise of participating in a “dis-organized” organization, the personalities and origins of the two groups are full of colorful contrasts. Rudie Martindale, Queen Mum of the Shady Ladies, has created an intimate group made up largely, with one notable exception, of women who have been friends since kindergarten. Lorraine Robles has not known Martindale for the same 45-plus years as many other members, but Robles feels like she has known Martindale forever. The two met at work and, drawn to each other by common bonds of family tragedy and single-motherhood, forged a lasting friendship. Martindale’s surprise birthday present to Robles when she reached 50? Induction into the Shady Ladies.

Shady Ladies’ 10 members enjoy activities ranging from their annual yard sale conducted wearing purple vests and red visors to a recent sojourn on the Queen Mary II.

Martindale considers her group fairly low-key and subtle as far as Red Hatters go. For instance, this group's frequent take on Red Hat regalia is wearing red hibiscus flowers, because the women are not fond of "hat hair." And, although these women are longtime friends, being Red Hatters provides another good excuse to spend time together. Time, Martindale says, is devoted to "sisterhood, friendship, no rules and no men." The 32 members of Queen Mum Michele Abrate's Island Dames recently celebrated its third anniversary as Red Hatters. Unlike the Shady Ladies, most of the Island Dames met each other through the group. Abrate's years as a professional travel guide for women prompted her to organize her chapter. "It's the connection thing," she says. "Many women who embrace this movement have retired, become empty-nesters, perhaps been widowed and are seeking a social outlet." She finds Red Hatters relish spontaneity, lack of fundraising and absence of committees.

The Island Dames, ranging in age from the requisite 50 up to 75, indulge their girlish passions in activities like make-it-yourself sundaes at Tucker's Super-Creamed Ice Cream and vodka tastings at Hangar One. Members decked out in full Red Hat regalia—red hats of every description, glorious purple attire and sometimes feather boas—report being greeted by friendly, curious smiles on their many outings. That, too, according to Abrate, is a key to the Red Hat movement: "Making women of a certain age 'visible.' " Visibility, fun and friendship draw members of both Alameda Red Hat Society chapters to regional events like teas and craft fairs that attract hundreds of their Bay Area sisters. In addition, Dean's Hallmark Shop on Park Street happily caters to enthusiastic society shoppers with special Red Hat products. And although the Island Dames and Shady Ladies differ in size and sensibility, a common thread unites them with Red Hatters around the world: a feisty, life-affirming zest for whatever may come next. Island Dame Sue Hansen embraces the Red Hat philosophy with gusto. "Grow old gracefully? Hell, no! I plan to go to my grave with a martini in one hand and chocolate in the other," she declares. "I want to be able to say, 'Woo, what a ride!'"

Welcome to the society, ladies, and hold onto your Red Hats. You have a thrilling journey ahead.

#### BE A RED HATTER

The Island Dames welcomes new members. Contact information for this Alameda chapter and other East Bay chapters, which include members from Alameda, Oakland, Berkeley and San Leandro, can be found at [www.redhatsociety.com](http://www.redhatsociety.com). Dues are not required.