



By Lori Pankonin The Imperial Republican

Imperial's Balcony House Bed & Breakfast ranked as a destination place for five connected friends to celebrate life. Its popularity brought them back for the fourth time last week.

In the meantime, the five retired teachers have come to love Imperial, having checked out downtown, the library and the eating establishments. They do miss the restaurant and hope for Imperial's sake that there is one in place by their next visit.

The "FF" group first gathered to celebrate turning 50. What does FF stand for? They leave it at that as it can vary. Forever Friends, Fabulous Five and many other personal choices that bring chuckles.

Elaine Kallos, Lynn Ohmstede, Glenice Rishell and Barbara Sergeant share high school connections, all part of the Hastings Senior High Class of 1964. Sandy Howland from Aurora High School eventually bonded with the foursome. She roomed with Lynn their freshman year at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. Glenice was across the hall and Elaine in another UNL dorm.

Barb, however, attended Hastings College, making Hastings home for life. She was the Hastings Methodist Church organist in high school and maintains that role today. She is praised for planning great class reunions, starting with the 10-year and 20-year celebrations. The class then decided they needed to start reuniting every five years, this year marking No. 50.

The five FFs had a great time when they met the year they each turned 50 but found it difficult to coordinate dates that worked for all after that. However Glenice was diagnosed with cancer in 2005 and she said if she was alive in a year, she wanted to start meeting every year. And they have.

Sandy survived open heart surgery and they all appreciate that they can continue to share time together.

Destinations changed until they found the Balcony House on the Internet which gives them a convenient central meeting spot. Elaine and Lynn from Littleton and Glenice from Fort Collins carpool from Colorado and Barb and Sandy come from Hastings and Aurora in Nebraska.

"I'm not usually a bed and breakfast fan," Elaine said.

But she is totally impressed with the Balcony House and raved about the décor, the warm cookies and the downhome hospitality of Jim and Linda, who coincidentally also came from Littleton.

The ladies all taught school more than 30 years so have that in common. However, they bring variation from other walks of life. One never married, one divorced and brings the blended family scope to the table and the others have traditional marriages with children and grandchildren. One has a special needs child.

Sandy's grandchildren are local and she maintains a scrapbook for each with a weekly picture. She describes what's going on in their lives and hers. She then picks a different picture to share with the FFs. So the FFs have watched her grandchildren grow and develop, despite the miles

separating them.

Lack of conversation never seems to be an issue. They appreciate new perspective and if they don't agree, they agree to disagree.

One day started with breakfast in the Balcony House dining area at 8 a.m. and they didn't leave the table until 1 p.m.

Then due to the writing interests of Elaine, the other FFs honored her desire to go to The Imperial Republican office. Co-Publisher Lori Pankonin said she enjoyed an entertaining conversation with them, then took them on a tour of the community.

One year, they stopped at the school to visit Mike Wentz, the elementary principal who had come from Aurora. This year, they dined with an acquaintance of Barb's who met them in Grant.

The FFs all adopted Barb's mom, Agnes Anderson, who was a teacher during their junior high and high school years. She traveled the Panama Canal at age 100 and garnered awe and amazement from the FFs. They felt blessed to have seen her just two weeks before she died at age 103.

Sandy has the only living parent. Her mother, a gifted knitter, has made treasured sweaters for all the FF orphans. Sandy teaches Tai Chi exercise classes at the Aurora Methodist Church. If weather permitted, they thought they might turn some heads by practicing Tai Chi outside at the Balcony House.

Barb enjoys crocheting and has created items during FF visits. Lynn and Elaine take interest in art and painting as well as quilting. As mentioned, Barb plays the organ and Elaine enjoys instruments. She calls herself a kazooist and has been known to kazoo "Happy Birthday" over the phone to a fellow FF.

Elaine has hiked the Grand Canyon and is a leader in the Colorado Mountain Club. Lynn said she has a passion for nature and served as a trail angel while her husband conquered the 2160-mile Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine. Trail angels support the dedicated hikers with food, water, medical supplies and welcomed treats.

Glenice was once described as "natural" and she feels that's the best compliment you can get. She admits she's very blunt and doesn't hold back with her honest opinions which stirs up more FF discussion. She said she grew up with four brothers and learned to hold her own.

The FFs agree they have interconnections galore and continue to establish more as they gather to rehash old memories and make new ones. E-mail and Facebook also help keep them in touch.