

Strength in Numbers

by Nancy Moreland

One isn't the loneliest number anymore, thanks to an alumna's vision to bring women together for support and practical help.



Carolyn Newton Curry '66

It's a question Carolyn Newton Curry '66 hears frequently: "What's a married woman like you doing in a place like this?" But the place Curry finds herself is exactly where she wants to be—in the company of women expanding their horizons and creating community. It's just that the place where Curry—married for more than 40 years—finds herself is populated by single women.

In fall 2002, Curry formed Women Alone Together with a mission to mitigate women's natural tendency to withdraw once they find themselves alone. Women Alone Together welcomes women of all ages who are widows, divorcees, single by choice or married but feel alone because of a chronically ill spouse or because they are physically, mentally or spiritually separated from their mates.

Appropriately enough, Curry didn't go it alone when she decided to start the group. "I thought, 'What better place to host a group like this than at a women's college, and what better place than my women's college?'" Indeed, Agnes Scott College has played an integral role since the group's inception. President Mary Brown Bullock was an early supporter, as was Marilyn Hammond of the Alumnae Association. Several Scotties helped Curry form a committee and board of directors. "From the very beginning, I've worked hand-in-hand with the College and alumnae," Curry explains.

The committee's primary concern was to present substantive information to single women. Secondly, they wanted to create a venue for women to meet others with similar experiences and help them realize they are not alone. And they wanted to do something special for women who often do special things for others.

Like many great concepts, Women Alone Together developed gradually. Curry's passionate interest in women's history and well-being was awakened at Agnes Scott. "They valued women,

appreciated our intelligence and believed in us. We had so many female professors—something I didn't appreciate until graduate school when I met students who hadn't had any female professors."

Curry spent the tumultuous years of the Women's Movement rearing her children. The seed planted at Agnes Scott sustained her for 10 years until she was able to begin graduate school. While studying history for a master's and later a doctorate, she discovered a lack of classes on women's history. Curry and her classmates began requesting these courses. "I did all my papers on women's issues," she recalls.

Curry's dissertation focused on the diary of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, a 19th-century woman born in Augusta, Ga. Thomas spent her early years as a privileged planter's daughter, but later became a women's rights activist. "Her diary made me think about how women coped with difficulties," says Curry. After barely surviving the Civil War, Thomas joined the Women's Christian Temperance Union. "Women put 'Christian' in the title and wore hats to make the groups look respectable! From the WCTU she moved into the fight for women's suffrage. I don't think we realize how much courage it took for women to be involved in the suffrage movement, especially in the South. A suffragette was radical back then," explains Curry.

Around 10 years ago, while teaching part time at the University of Kentucky, Curry was asked to teach a course called, "Women in Contemporary Society." Her students represented a cross-section—from 70-year-olds to middle-aged divorcees to college coeds. Curry enjoyed her students' dialogue so much, she invited them to a covered dish get-together. During dinner, she voiced her desire to create group discussions that were free from grades and papers.

The idea that emerged at a leisurely gathering gained new urgency when a close friend died in a plane crash, and Curry helped his widow struggle through a bewildering time. "There was so much to be taken care of for which she was not prepared," Curry says. The widow asked Curry, "While there are support groups like Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, where do women like me go?" She offered to help if Curry would start a group.

Curry is one of those increasingly rare women in a long-term relationship. Though happily married to Bill Curry, former football coach at Georgia Tech, the University of Alabama, and the University of Kentucky, she was often alone during her husband's demanding career. The family's frequent moves presented another challenge. During those upheavals, Curry became responsible for her own happiness and created meaningful teaching and mentoring roles in each new location — coping methods now taught in Women Alone Together seminars. It was during one of her husband's business trips that the concept for Women Alone Together solidified. "I was alone in my mountain cabin and asked myself, 'What do I want to do now?' I thought, 'Well, I love Agnes Scott and I love women's studies.' From soul-searching, friends' experiences and years of studying women's history, the group was born.

While Agnes Scott was the incubator and alumnae the midwives of Women Alone Together, the gatherings are open to any woman who wishes to attend. "We see ourselves as stewards of the program, but it belongs to the women," says Carolyn Clarke '64, who was instrumental in starting the group. Clarke has never married, and while she maintains an active life, she has a "general interest in the isolation faced by a lot of single women. We understood there was a need ready to be tapped and we've had a tremendous response," she says.

Fifty women attended the group's first seminar; 120 were present at the second. The one-day seminars present expert speakers discussing one of the group's three areas of focus: financial/legal, emotional/spiritual and health/wellness concerns of women who live alone. Mini-series run three consecutive Saturdays and include a guest speaker, question and answer period and in-depth discussion.

Lucy Herbert Molinaro '64, a widow, "took copious notes" during seminars. "There are holes in your life when you lose a spouse, so I have found support groups that fill those voids," she says. Women Alone Together is distinctive, Molinaro feels, in that it honors the struggles and successes of single women. She appreciates the stories of women who have transformed potentially devastating experiences into personal strength. One woman, for example, spoke of surviving breast cancer. A widow recalled kissing her husband as he left for a business trip only to later learn that his plane had crashed. A divorcee described her ex-husband's abandonment of their son.

Women Alone Together strives to be responsive to the needs of participants. A reading group was started when women expressed difficulty finding activities for single women in a couples-oriented culture. Curry opened her North Carolina cabin for a retreat, an event so popular it may become an annual occurrence.

Drawn to the group for many reasons, Rosemary Kittrell '61 attended the first retreat. "I have very little family, so the need for companions and support groups has become more important. Women Alone Together helps normalize the experiences of single women who feel awkward in certain social situations." The

Finding Your Family of Choice: Seven Tips for Creating Community

One of the main reasons women isolate themselves is depression, according to Carolyn Curry. Depression can make women feel fragile, withdrawn and reluctant to reach out to others. While these emotions are normal under some circumstances, they shouldn't linger. To that end, Women Alone Together presents seminars designed to help women enjoy their own company and create a sense of community. Here are a few ideas shared during recent seminars:

- 1 You are responsible for your own happiness.** Examine your life and discover what you really enjoy doing, then participate in activities that bring you pleasure.
- 2 Be proactive.** Call a former classmate to accompany you to a movie or visit a museum.
- 3 Be brave.** Attend couples-oriented events even if uncomfortable at first. Your true friends will include you in their activities.
- 4 Cultivate your faith group.** Go to places filled with nurturing people.
- 5 Take courses and attend support groups.**
- 6 Start a potluck or dinner club group** made up of singles and people without family nearby.
- 7 Be a mentor to a child.**

group helps these individuals realize that there's "a whole community of women out there who feel the same way," says Kittrell.

That community includes more than 42 percent of American women, according to Betsy Israel, author of *Bachelor Girl: The Secret History of Single Women in the Twentieth Century*. "The average woman outlives her husband by seven years, and experts are predicting that many baby boomer women will outlive their husbands by 15 to 20 years," Curry comments, noting that such statistics are all the more reason to continue connecting, informing and inspiring.

Nancy Moreland is a Georgia freelance writer and a frequent contributor to Agnes Scott The Magazine.

TO LEARN MORE

- For more information on Women Alone Together, call 404 816-5332 or 404 231-6807.
- *Ageing Well: Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life from the Landmark Harvard Study of Adult Development*, George Vaillant
- *Flying Solo: Single Women in Midlife*, Carol Anderson
- *On Your Own: A Widow's Passage to Emotional and Financial Well-Being*, Alexandra Armstrong and Mary Donohue