

Friendship, Advice and A Roll of the Dice

My mother's raucous dice games annoyed me as a child, but they taught me what luck is really about.

BY AMY PATUREL

IT WAS 11:30 ON A SCHOOL NIGHT and my mother and her friends were keeping me up. Again. The women—with their Farrah Fawcett hairstyles and bell-bottom pants—had been gabbing, giggling and playing a dice game called Bunko since 7 p.m.—with no intention of stopping. Once, when it was my mom's turn to host, I asked them to quiet down—a pre-teen schooling grown women on the importance of beauty rest. But they just ignored me; this was their time to bond. While I was annoyed at being kept awake, I was envious of what they shared—hoping someday I'd be part of a similar group. I didn't realize then that the Bunko bond was sacred, something not easily duplicated.

A Bunko game consists of six rounds. During the first round, players roll for 1s, second round for 2s, and so on. There are four people to a table in teams of two, and the objective is for each team to roll more of that round's number. Three dice of the appointed number is a Bunko, worth 21 points. As soon as a team from a designated table reaches 21, a team member rings a bell signaling the end of the round.

The first Bunko party took place at my mother's friend Kathie's house in October 1971, three years before I was born. Twelve women in their early 20s—who had met through family, work and even grade school—gathered to eat brownies with candy pumpkins on top and learn how to play the simple dice game. Each player contributed \$3, and the woman with the most points at the end of the night took home the pot.

But the winnings were a small part of the experi-

ence; each of the Bunko women brought more than just their \$3 to the table. Betty brought a passion for cooking and an Elvis impersonation to rival Vegas pros. Millie, a stay-at-home mom, reliably had a child every two years, finally stopping after her fifth. Judy worked as a nurse; Barbara's



THE HIGH ROLLERS: Some 35 years later the Bunko Girls are still at it, enjoying long nights of chatter and laughter

hands smelled like hair chemicals from her home-based styling business. The common thread: a love of laughter and a zest for life that buoyed them through seemingly insurmountable challenges.

In the early years, it seemed every month someone announced a pregnancy. At one point, five of the Bunko Girls were expecting. As the

years progressed, so, too, did life's dramas. Pam admitted her son was involved in drugs; Millie wept when she told the group of her high-school-age daughter's pregnancy. When Mary's daughter developed a tumor on her adrenal gland, Kathie and Judy came knocking with pizza, wine and tissues. Each member of the crew was willing to take one for the team. When Kathie was diagnosed with cancer, the women created a rotating schedule to ensure someone cooked and cleaned for her family while she underwent treatment. And after Judy downed too much tequila and danced into the Jacuzzi (fully clothed) during her husband's 60th-birthday bash, half of the Bunko group followed her in.

Memories like these live on in the Bunko Girls' journal, which chronicles their adventures. Headlines range from baby announcements to eulogies. Marianne was the first to pass away, in 2003, succumbing to breast cancer. The Bunko Girls attended the funeral, wearing identical necklaces and holding hands. Each carried a yellow rose to place on the casket as they laid their friend to rest.

I watched in anguish as Marianne's sons, Jeff, Todd and Greg, carried her casket and as her daughter, Colleen, delivered a eulogy that brought the mourners to tears. That night when the Bunko Girls and their families gathered in the hotel bar to celebrate Marianne's memory, I understood what it was like to be one of the team. The Bunko Girls know more about my life than my closest friends. Bunko members have attended each other's children's graduations, weddings and baby showers. They have read my writings and held Colleen's infant daughter. And in the process, they have taught another generation the meaning of friendship.

Some 35 years later, the Bunko Girls, sporting a few gray hairs, are still at it, enjoying long nights of chatter and laughter. But today, their laughter is more robust because it comes from women who have experienced pain, sadness, fear, loss—and life—together. With the monthly roll of the dice, they roll on with their lives, recognizing that while they may not have it all together, together they have it all.

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