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By Amy Robinson, Staff writer

Don't like the bar scene? This local group of folks offers singles some better alternatives

'Meet people, make friends and have fun'

One important thing to know about SpeakEasy Singles is that it's not a dating service.

The nonprofit group, which has been in the area since 1985, bills itself as an alternative place for single people to get together and socialize. (That's not to say relationships don't occur — there have been at least a dozen marriages of people who have met through the group.)

Its motto is "Meet people, make friends and have fun."

"People get burnt out on dating, but don't want to sit at home alone," said Nancy Sarver, a three-year member and publicist for the group. "They don't like the bar scene, but they don't know what else to do. We're a place to go, something to do, a way to get together with people."

If I didn't have SpeakEasy," she joked, "I would probably sit at home and watch CNN or The Weather Channel."

The group is open to all single people, including widows, divorcees and those who are legally separated. "As long as they're not married, they're welcome," said Ruth Justice, a 12-year member of the group and its food coordinator.

SpeakEasy Singles was founded by Linda Geronilla and Carolyn Stevens after Stevens went through a divorce and was looking for a way to meet people outside of the bar scene. Geronilla contacted a friend in California about a successful singles group he had there. Although the California group was Christian-based, SpeakEasy Singles has no religious affiliation.

More than 90 people attended the first SpeakEasy Singles meeting in 1985. Since then, the group has grown significantly. It averages about 115 members, although the number has been as high as 200.

The core group ranges in age from mid-to late-30s up to people in their 80s. Some regulars come from Ohio and Kentucky and, in late 2008, three women came from Columbus. The women-to-men ration is about 60/40.

Membership is not required, but it does have benefits. Members pay \$2 less than nonmembers at all events, and they receive a monthly newsletter with detailed information on upcoming events.

The group's main events are the dances they hold on the second Saturday of each month at the Dunbar National Guard Armory (\$8 for members, \$10 nonmembers). They also hold special dances on Halloween and New Year's Eve. There is a game room at these events, too, for people who might want to socialize but not necessarily dance.

Sarver noted that, especially with new participants, "we make an effort for personal interaction so people don't feel awkward or alone."

In the summer, the group holds three picnics with games like volleyball, horseshoes, badminton and croquet. It also hosts some house parties, like a Super Bowl party held earlier this month.

Other outings include camping trips, trivia nights, visits to places like Blennerhassett Island, Cincinnati Reds ballgames and the Amish Country and activities like bowling and ice skating. They go to West Virginia Power games and attend festivals like St. Albans' Riverfest and South Charleston's Summerfest.

One group of members gets together and rides bikes every Saturday, and sometimes members will attend Ron Sowell's open mic night and the Lighthouse Café music series together. Some members set up "dinner and a movie" nights, and Sarver is trying to put together a "play and pizza" event, where people can gather to play Wii games and then have some food.

"We'll do pretty much whatever anybody body wants to do," Sarver said. "We're always looking for something different to do."

"We don't want to do things over and over, because that gets old," Justice said. "We try to give it a break and then bring it back later on. That way, people get enthused about it again."

One of the things she's hoping to bring back is an auction where members bring in their own items to auction off and keep whatever profits they make. Sarver would love to bring back an event she just learned about from Justice — a Bahamian cruise. About 20 members took one in 2001.

All of SpeakEasy Singles' events are alcohol-free, contributing to a safe, secure environment. In her 12 years, Justice has only seen two instances of a person being asked to leave. Sarver has never seen it occur.

"When you get to be 30, 40, 50, it's tough to find something to do. We're here," Sarver said. Don't worry about coming alone. You're always among friends with SpeakEasy."

For more on SpeakEasy Singles
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