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RETIRED OLD MEN EATING OUT

Twice a week, club members swap tales, spread laughter

By Gary Ruegsegger

Correspondent

Twice a week at a Ghent restaurant, the ROME-Os of Norfolk meet. But the meaning behind the acronym might surprise you.

It's officially called the Retired Old Men Eating Out club, and they gather Tuesday and Thursday mornings at Baker's Crust on 21st Street.

"They're gentle old souls set in their ways," said Jill Young, a server at the restaurant. "They definitely have fun with life."

Attendance is not mandatory and the agenda is never fixed, but the menu is always seasoned with memories, good times and more than a dash of one-upmanship. The walls echo with constant barbs, fun and laughter.

Over the past 30 years, the group has had a blend of doctors, attorneys, educators, businessmen and a mayor.

"I don't know how I got in," said Buddy Davis, 86, a retired trucking executive and resident of Hague Towers. "I guess they just forgot to close the door one morning."

Davis was a founder and the first president of the Old Dominion University Intercollegiate Foundation (now the Old Dominion Athletic Foundation). A dorm at the college bears his name.

Spurred on by the group at a recent gathering, he launched into one of his many war stories: "I was in the Army and stationed in Trinidad during World War II. I was getting a little full of myself, and the company commander called me in. He stared at me and said, 'Davis, we could lose you out in that jungle.' That straightened me right out."

Before the laughter subsided, he started another story.

"Buddy will stop talking when Norfolk stops flooding," laughed Bob Andrews, a retired Army colonel.

Seated next to Davis, attorney Harry McCoy, 90, a 1940 Maury High School graduate, reminisced about his impromptu visit with Gov. Col-gate W. Darden Jr. on the way home from the University of Virginia in the early 1940s.

"Believe it or not, that story made the Richmond newspapers," McCoy said.

Other regulars include coach Al Tatem, 88; businessman Ernie Hardee, 72; and attorney Wilson Dodson II, 89. Former Granby principal Johnny Brown, 93, is an occasional guest, too.

Sometimes the group reminisces about its past members – among them, the late Joe Perkins, an original member of the WTAR (now WKTR) newsroom, and the late Don Griffin, Lefty Driesell's high school basketball coach.

"Joe was amazing," said Joe McPhillips, 88, a 1941 graduate of Ocean View's Holy Trinity High School and longtime owner of the Larchmont grocery Bazemore's. "He remembered everybody's name, where they grew up and who they married."

Griffin, a founding member of the Norfolk Sports Club and former Granby High School principal, organized the ROMEO group in 1979. Early members included Winston Lane, Jack Callahan, Rob Grandy and Judson Hodges.

Former Norfolk mayor Vincent J. Thomas, 90, a 1939 Maury graduate, has attended many ROMEO gatherings.

"We all like each other, and we grew up together," Thomas said in a telephone interview.

"Most of us are retired and needed something to do. Tell them hello from me and I miss them."

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Buddy Davis, from left, Harry McCoy, Joe McPhillips, Wilson Dodson II, Ernie Hardee, Bob Andrews, Johnny Brown and Al Tatem, are also known as Norfolk's ROMEO club. They meet at Baker's Crust in Ghent.
