

ROMEIO's enjoy food, conversation, camaraderie at gatherings

By Tonyia Cone

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Once a month, a group of 15 to 26 retired men meet at the Brick Oven Restaurant on Jollyville Road to schmooze and learn about topics ranging from politics to health.

The group, calling itself Retired Old Men Eating Out, or ROMEIO, is informal. There are no dues or officers, and the only requirement for those who attend the meetings is to be a retired man. The club does not advertise; new members find out about the group by word of mouth.

Manny Rosenblatt, who said he believes he attended the group's first meeting, noted that ROMEIO clubs exist across the nation. His group began in Austin about six or seven years ago when a handful of men from Congregation Beth Israel got together for lunch at a different restaurant each month.

About three years ago, the club decided to meet at the Brick Oven each month since they could use a private dining room there, and the group now features speakers at about half their meetings.

Rosenblatt, 86 and retired from the retail jewelry business, said he enjoys the group's camaraderie and the opportunity to spend time with men his age.

Sandy Bauman, who has attended ROMEIO meetings regularly for about the last three years, said, "It's just a lot of fun. It's a good outlet for old folks like myself."

Bauman, who is 87 years old and owned Concrete Chemicals Corp. when he retired, said ROMEIO is made up of a unique mix of people, including doctors, lawyers, merchants, chemists and professors. With liberals and conservatives, as well as Democrats, Republicans and independents, members talk a lot about politics and the news of the day, he added.

The Austin club generally consists of Jewish members. One man, however, learned about the group when he was invited as a speaker and, after addressing the



Jack Callway, a retired Army colonel, addresses the ROMEIO's about his military service, in a meeting several years ago. Afterward, Callway asked what was required to join, and today is the group's only non-Jewish member.

group about his military service, asked if he could join.

"We all said we have no restrictions, so he joined," Bauman said of Jack Callway, a retired Army colonel who, as a Catholic, is the group's only non-Jewish member. "He has been with us for the last three years."

While some ROMEIO's have been in Austin for many years, others are newcomers.

Sam Steeg, the 85-year-old retired owner of an electronic servicing firm, said he joined the Austin club a month after he moved here from New Orleans in 2005, after Hurricane Katrina. He belonged to a ROMEIO club in New Orleans, and a friend suggested he attend the Austin club's meeting.

"It's a good way to get to know the people here," Steeg said. "I look forward to going every month."

ROMEIO speakers also are diverse. Past speakers have included Dr. Homer Arnold, a cardiothoracic surgeon, and *Austin American-Statesman* columnist John Kelso. Jay Rubin, chief executive officer of the Jewish Community Association of Austin, talked to the group in January about the future of the Austin Jewish community. Corrie MacLaggan, health and human services reporter for the *American-Statesman* and Bauman's granddaughter, has spoken to ROMEIO about Cuba's

Jewish community. Her husband, Oliver Bernstein, a Sierra Club border representative, also has been a featured speaker.

"A lot of these guys have been friends for a long time," MacLaggan said, "so it's really neat that they continue to get together and learn about the world."

Harvey Kronberg, political commentator and writer, editor and publisher of the *Quorum Report*, spoke to the group in February about the upcoming election cycle, the broken Republican story line and reenergizing of the Texas Democratic Party. After the ROMEIO's listened to his 20-minute talk, Kronberg said, they had an hourlong, freewheeling discussion about everything.

'SHARP AND FEARLESS'

"They are very sharp and fearless in asking questions. They're engaged, are keeping track of what's going on and are articulate about it. It's challenging for the speaker," Kronberg said, adding that he is unsure how he could avoid being in a group like ROMEIO's when he is their age.

When the group does not line up a speaker, members who attend the meeting discuss their lives.

Bauman, an Air Force veteran said, "We talk about what did when were kids, what we understand, what we don't and who takes care of our computers because we don't."

A self-professed "yellow dog" Democrat, Bauman said he has made good friends through ROMEIO, including Buddy Freed, whom he described as "a staunch Republican."

"We have such a great time we go to lunch every now and then," Bauman said. "It's kind of interesting. There are a lot of people I wouldn't have met if not for the ROMEIO's."

Women are not allowed to join ROMEIO clubs, Bauman explained, because some of the topics discussed are considered inappropriate for co-ed groups. His wife, Marilyn, said she thinks the group is terrific.

Sandy Bauman joked, "I think the wives are glad to get their husbands out of the house."

Retired men who would like to join the group should simply attend a lunch meeting, Sandy Bauman explained. ROMEIO meets the first Monday of each month at 12:30 p.m. at the Brick Oven Restaurant on Jollyville Road. Those who would like to speak to the club should contact him at sbauman@austin.rr.com.

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