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TOP STORY

Community giving blooms at Rose Hill during annual Dinner with Friends en BlancBy Larry Wood lwood@aikenstandard.com May 8, 2017

STAFF PHOTO BY LARRY WOOD

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Kelly Lynn, left, Mary Commons, Mary Hembree, Barbara Smith and Jill Uhler pose behind an elegant floral arrangement of Queen Anne's Lace, Oakleaf Hydrangeas and ivory-colored roses Sunday evening at Dinner with Friends en Blanc in the garden at Rose Hill.

A peacock with an eight-foot plume of cascading white feathers greeted guests at the entrance to Rose Hill on Sunday evening for the third-annual Dinner with Friends en Blanc.

The theme for the fundraiser, which supports the Community Medical Clinic of Aiken County and the The Cottage at Nurture Home sponsored by the 2016-17 Class of Leadership Aiken County, was "Birds of a Feather Flock Together." Friends, all dressed "en blanc," French for white, gathered together for an evening of good food and good fellowship to support two good causes.

The event is free, and guests make donations. During the past two soirees, Aiken residents donated \$140,000, said Mallory Holley, a member of the 2016-17 Class of Leadership Aiken County and former director of the Community Medical Clinic.

Part of the proceeds from this year's fundraiser will help build The Cottage at Nurture Home, a homeless shelter for women and children.

"The class toured Nurture Home, and one of the things we learned is that they have a waiting list for women and have to turn people away because they don't have the space," Holley said. "We thought what a great project to build a cottage in their backyard to give an additional opportunity for a women to move into Nurture Home."

Holley said engineers have drawn up the plans for the cottage, and groundbreaking could begin in the next few weeks as soon as proceeds from this year's event are in.

"It's neat that the community backs two organizations that are very important, and it's nice to see that the community sees them as important through their support of this event," she said.

Jamie Mothkovich, executive director of the Community Medical Clinic, said proceeds from the event will go directly to operating expenses.

"We pour all of the proceeds into our clinic, and they go right out to our patients," she said. "For every dollar we get, we're able to expand that to \$18 worth of services for our patients. We're a nonprofit. We're a free clinic, and we really pinch our pennies to make every penny count for our patients."

The clinic will use the proceeds to buy medications, diabetic and diabetic education supplies and oral hygiene kits for patients, Mothkovich said.

"Our fundraisers and what United Way does for us keeps us going," she said. "Without this, we couldn't do it, and we are always so overwhelmed by the community support. Aiken is a wonderful community and rallies around its nonprofits."

The clinic serves the uninsured residents of Aiken County between the ages of 19 and 64 who already are diagnosed with a chronic condition, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol, COPD, asthma, seizures and other medical conditions. They also must meet income requirements.

"We're just a small clinic, and we're community-supported," Mothkovich said. "Bigger clinics receive federal funds, but we rely on small grants and the community. Without the community, we couldn't do what we do."

As is the tradition with Dinner with Friends en Blanc, guests received a text or email with the location, which had been kept secret even from Rose Hill's staff, who were expecting a large wedding party, at 5:30 Sunday afternoon.

Shortly after, guests, dressed all in white, began arriving at the gate carrying bouquets of white flowers, toting wicker baskets and wheeling coolers filled with picnic suppers up Greenville Street.

Kandace Cave arrived at Rose Hill's gate with a table decoration of white feathers and balloons. She didn't know the night's theme, "Birds of a Feather," but she chose the same for her table.

"It's a great thing to do on a Sunday afternoon, giving back to the community and having fun with friends," she said.

Once inside, the partygoers decorated their tables, which were tucked among the formal hedges and stone-lined, gravel-filled pathways that meander through the garden of the historic Winter Colony estate that once was the home of Claudia Lea Phelps and now is an inn.

Mary Hembree chose "simple elegance" as the theme for her table decorations.

She found Queen Anne's Lace on the side of the road; pale, white oakleaf hydrangeas from her backyard; added ivory-colored roses; and put them all together in a sterling silver tureen for the centerpiece. She punctuated the setting with candleholders made of sparkling crystal beads.

"I love everything over the top," Hembree said. "This is my first time here. It's a beautiful venue. I'm most impressed."

Mary Commons came last year and was so impressed she decided to bring a group of friends this year.

"This is the way a picnic should be – elegant with some bling," she said.

This year was Barbara Smith's first, too.

"The idea of a surprise, white party was intriguing to me, and I wanted to see what it was all about," she said. "I am very impressed with how beautiful it all is and hope to be back next year."

Ladonna Armstrong chose a nautical theme, Aiken to Seashore, for her table with friends and designed a one-of-a-kind hat for the occasion. She used the cream-colored petals from a large, artificial flower to create rolling ocean waves and placed three model ships among them.

"There are not too many community events other than the horse racing where we get to come together," said Armstrong, who with Katherine Slayton, her partner at White Rose Fleurs & Event Design in downtown Aiken, created the peacock design for the entryway. "This is a gorgeous place with the fountains and paths. It makes you forget about all the things in life for a little while, and you can come together and have a picnic with your friends."

Betty Ryberg, who helped start the event two years ago and coordinated the entryway design this year, said almost 700 people signed up to attend.

"People like the tradition of an event, and I think maybe that speaks to who Aiken is," she said. "The people who are brand new here didn't get to go before but heard about it, and the people who have been last year or the year before didn't want to give it up. It's kind of like our Thanksgiving in the spring. It's a unique holiday."

Larry Wood covers education for the *Aiken Standard*.



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Dinner with Friends en Blanc
May 7, 2017

Larry Wood

A native of Aiken, Larry Wood covers education for the *Aiken Standard*.