

'Shopping Night' in a man's world

By David Rattigan, Globe Correspondent | December 11, 2005

Sometime this month, I will get a phone call from one of my old friends inviting me to "Men's Shopping Night," a highlight of the holiday season.

It is an unofficial tradition for a handful of guys who graduated from Beverly High School in 1977 and a couple of us from 1976. It is a chance for 12 to 17 old friends to say hello and celebrate the season.

At one time, it actually involved shopping.

One could call it a bonding experience, if one were certain that other men wouldn't give one grief for using the term "bonding experience."

As American suburbanites, our lives are full of traditions, and "Men's Shopping Night" is one of the best sort -- totally made up, with no reverence and limited obligation. There's no preparation involved; you don't need to wear your best clothes or be on your best behavior. You don't need to show up on time and you don't need to bring a fruitcake. You just show up.

And since "Men's Shopping Night" is code for something else requiring special clearance, it makes it all the more fun.

Nobody recalls exactly who was in attendance for the first "Shopping Night." As I recall, a few of the guys who grew up in my Beverly neighborhood bumped into one another at the Northshore Mall one December night in the 1990s. Knowing my friends, I'm sure it was around Dec. 23.

After helping one another find last-minute gifts, which is akin to watching early man discover fire, they stopped in for a beer at Joe's American Bar & Grill, a pub at the mall. The next year, they decided to do it again, and invited a few more guys.

Over several years, the group expanded and the program was simplified.

"The shopping lasted about three years," said Dave Crowell of Beverly, a longtime participant.

"Men's Shopping Night" also no longer takes place anywhere near a mall because no one wants to deal with the traffic.

"It's a good excuse to get everybody out," said Rob Houde of Danvers, another regular. He recalled that at one point those who actually did shop were subject to verbal ridicule. There was even talk of forcing them to pick up the tab.

While most wives see through their husbands' motives as they would a window, not all of the wives caught on right away. For some, the actual purpose of "Men's Shopping Night" was pieced together after a few conversations at a few holiday parties.

"Some [wives] actually thought that we were out shopping diligently," Houde said.

These are family men, many of whom have done OK by the standards Americans use to judge success. The group includes a fund accountant, chief information officer, carpenter, electrician,

schoolteacher, plastics engineer, consultant, and banker. "Men's Shopping Night" gives them a reason to take a break and meet up with old friends, some of whom they haven't heard from since the previous year, and the last "Shopping Night."

The evening starts late, accommodating work schedules or family obligations, be it putting young children to bed or watching older kids' basketball games.

The guys renew their acquaintance for a couple of hours over a couple of beers before returning to their wives and children and tomorrow morning's alarm clock.

For Chris Shea of Beverly, it is a way his friends from high school can maintain their enduring and unusual long-term friendship.

"A pretty good bond developed in those times and has continued through our adult lives," he said.

Unofficial traditions -- be they annual cookouts or group trips to Fenway Park -- are part of many lives. "Men's Shopping Night" is certainly not confined to this group. Crowell recalled that one year he bumped into a bunch of guys he knew from a Lynn-based recreational men's soccer team. They were holding their own "Shopping Night."

One of the guys, a schoolteacher, recalls exiting Victoria's Secret with a little bag of something and walking directly into the path of some students, but he isn't sure if that occurred during a "Men's Shopping Night."

In fact, nobody could remember anything interesting that happened during one of those nights. Houde compared it to an episode of "Seinfeld." "Everybody looks forward to it, we have a great time, and nothing really happens," he said.

Which is part of the charm, of course.

The success of "Men's Shopping Night" may give birth to a new unofficial tradition, which is in the early-discussion stages.

There is talk about getting together in January -- for "Men's Return Night."

David Rattigan of Peabody is a frequent contributor to Globe North and a favored guest at malls everywhere.