

The Business 9 Women Kept A Secret For Three Decades

by Lori Weiss

□Somewhere in West Tennessee, not far from Graceland, nine women -- or "The 9 Nanas," as they prefer to be called -- gather in the darkness of night. At 4am they begin their daily routine -- a ritual that no one, not even their husbands, knew about for 30 years. They have one mission and one mission only: to create happiness. And it all begins with baked goods.

□"One of us starts sifting the flour and another washing the eggs," explained Nana Mary Ellen, the appointed spokesperson for their secret society. "And someone else makes sure the pans are all ready. We switch off, depending on what we feel like doing that day.

□"But you make sure to say Nana Pearl is in charge, because she's the oldest!" she added with a wink and a smile.

□Over the next three hours, The 9 Nanas (who all consider themselves sisters, despite what some of their birth certificates say) will whip up hundreds of pound cakes, as part of a grand scheme to help those in need. And then, before anyone gets as much as a glimpse of them, they'll disappear back into their daily lives. The only hint that may remain is the heavenly scent of vanilla, lemon and lime, lingering in the air.

□Even the UPS driver, who picks up hundreds of packages at a time, has no clue what these women, who range in age from 54 to 72, are doing. He's just happy to get a hug and a bag filled with special treats. What he doesn't know is that he's part of their master plan. A plan that began 35 years ago -- when the "sisters" got together for their weekly card game -- something their husbands referred to as "Broads and Bridge."

□"Pearl says it was all her idea," Mary Ellen teased, "but as I remember it, we were sitting around reminiscing about MaMaw and PaPaw and all the different ways they would lend a hand in the community." MaMaw and PaPaw are the grandparents who raised four of the women, Mary Ellen included, when their mother passed away; and they took in Pearl as their own, when her parents needed some help.

□"MaMaw Ruth would read in the paper that someone had died," Mary Ellen remembered, "and she'd send off one of her special pound cakes. She didn't have to know the family. She just wanted to put a little smile on their faces. And we started thinking about what we could do to make a difference like that. What if we had a million dollars? How would we spend it?

□So the ladies began brainstorming.

□"One of the sisters suggested that we should all start doing our own laundry and put the

money we saved to good use. I admit, I protested at first. There's just something about laundering that I don't like. But I was outnumbered! So among the nine of us, we'd put aside about \$400 a month and our husbands never noticed a thing. Their shirts looked just fine."

□And then the women started listening. They'd eavesdrop -- all with good intentions, of course -- at the local beauty shop or when they were picking up groceries. And when they heard about a widow or a single mom who needed a little help, they'd step in and anonymously pay a utility bill or buy some new clothes for the children.

□"We wanted to help as much as we could," Mary Ellen said, "without taking away from our own families, so we became coupon clippers. And we'd use green stamps. Remember those? We'd use green stamps and we'd make sure to go to Goldsmith's department store on Wednesdays. Every week they'd have a big sale and you could spend \$100 and walk away with \$700 worth of merchandise."

□The Nanas would find out where the person lived and send a package with a note that simply said, "Somebody loves you" -- and they'd be sure to include one of MaMaw Ruth's special pound cakes.

□The more people they helped, the bolder they became.

□"We gave new meaning to the term drive-by," Mary Ellen said with delight. "We'd drive through low-income neighborhoods and look for homes that had fans in the window. That told us that the people who lived there didn't have air-conditioning. Or we'd see that there were no lights on at night, which meant there was a good chance their utilities had been turned off. Then we'd return before the sun came up, like cat burglars, and drop off a little care package."

□For three decades, the ladies' good deeds went undetected -- that is, until five years ago, when Mary Ellen's husband, whom she lovingly calls "Southern Charmer," started noticing extra mileage on the car and large amounts of cash being withdrawn from their savings account.

□"He brought out bank statements and they were highlighted!" Mary Ellen said, recalling the horror she felt. "I tried to explain that I had bought some things, but he had this look on his face that I'd never seen before -- and I realized what he must have been thinking. I called the sisters and said, ''You all need to get over here right away.''"

□So 30 years into their secret mission, the 9 Nanas and their husbands gathered in Mary Ellen's living room and the sisters came clean. They told the husbands about the laundry and the eavesdropping -- even the drive-bys. And that's where their story gets even better -- because the husbands offered to help.

□"They were amazed that we were doing this and even more amazed that they never knew. We can keep a good secret! All but three of them are retired now, so sometimes they come with us on our drive-bys. In our area, all you need is an address to pay someone's utility bill, so we keep the men busy jotting down numbers."

□It wasn't long before the couples decided it was also time to tell their grown children. And that's when happiness began to happen in an even bigger way. The children encouraged their mothers to start selling MaMaw Ruth's pound cakes online, so they could raise money to help even more people. And it wasn't long before they were receiving more

than 100 orders in a day.

□“The first time we saw those orders roll in, we were jumping up and down,” Mary Ellen said with a laugh. “We were so excited that we did a ring-around-the-rosie! Then we called all the children and said, ‘What do we do next?’”

□That’s when the 9 Nanas moved their covert baking operation out of their homes and into the commercial kitchen of a restaurant owned by one of their sons, where they can sneak in before sunrise and sneak out before the staff comes in. They even hired a “happiness coordinator” (whose code name is “Sunny,” of course). Her identity needs to be a secret, too, so she can help out with the eavesdropping.

□“We swore her to secrecy -- her parents think she works in marketing. And, really, if you think about it, she is doing public relations and spends a lot of time looking for people to help at the supermarket!”

□These days, The 9 Nanas are able to take on even bigger projects, given their online success. Recently they donated more than \$5,000 of pillows and linens and personal care products to a shelter for survivors of domestic violence. And this August, they’ll celebrate their second consecutive “Happiness Happens Month” by sending tokens of their appreciation to one person in every state who has made a difference in their own community.

□And that million dollars they once wished for? They’re almost there. In the last 35 years, the 9 Nanas have contributed nearly \$900,000 of happiness to their local community.

□But that doesn’t mean they’re too busy to continue doing the little things that make life a bit happier. Sometimes they just pull out the phone book and send off pound cakes to complete strangers. And if the Nanas spot someone at the grocery store who appears to need a little help, it’s not unusual for them to start filling a stranger’s cart.

□“Not everyone is as lucky as we were to have MaMaw and PaPaw to take care of them, to fix all those things that are wrong.

□“So this is our way of giving back,” Mary Ellen said. “We want people to know that someone out there cares enough to do something. We want to make sure that happiness happens.”

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