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## Noblemen help kids but have fun doing it

By RICHARD QUINN, The Virginian-Pilot

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**Al Midgett founded The Noblemen in 1995. "If I'm going to be helping somebody, why not have fun?" he said.** Bill Tiernan photos/The Virginian-Pilot

VIRGINIA BEACH - A full-service bar to his back and a driving range in front of him, Jeff Ellis munched contentedly on a roast beef sandwich and a bag of chips. One of the best rounds of golf he would ever play was about to start.

The long waits on the fifth hole at Heron Ridge Golf Club would be smoothed out by a massage therapist. Segways would carry tired golfers up to the 17th green. And the beer would flow like Pungo creeks from the first well-placed drive to the last lost-in-the woods hack.

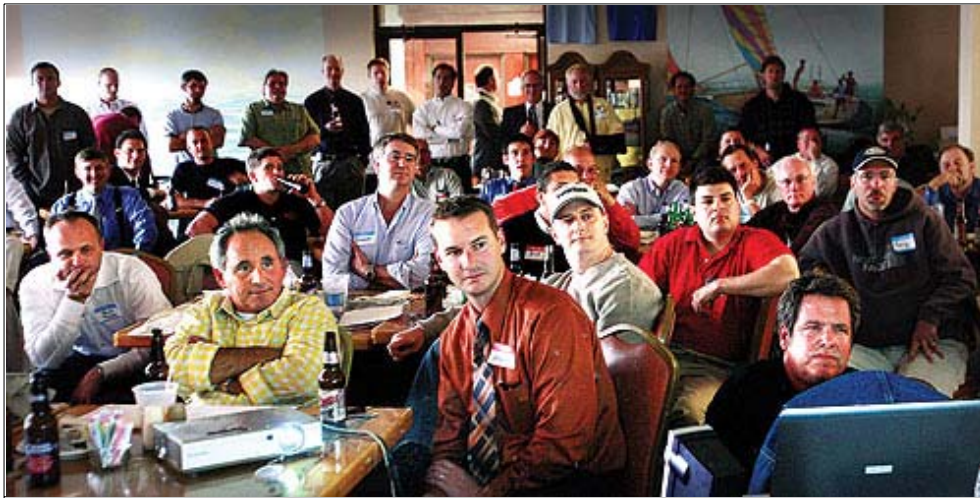
The duffer's dream round last week was crafted by The Noblemen, the charity group that put the tournament together. A Beach-based nonprofit lacking the cachet of a Kiwanis or Rotary club, the group, which now has 167 members, has spent nearly \$800,000 in the past eight years to help kids.

Most of the children are in hospice care, suffering from rare, incurable and cruel diseases. Fighting those diseases comes with a hefty bill, so The Noblemen raise money to help.

They do it by throwing parties. Big, loud bashes at such upscale places as The Cavalier Hotel and Heron Ridge. Their May 24 golf outing raised more than \$80,000, a record high for these guys

And while the impetus for everyone to pay up is the depression of disease, the parties thrown by The Noblemen are all about the joy of life.

"It's not a maudlin group," said Ellis, 63, one of The Noblemen's first members. "It's a fun group. It's a party group. And it's a successful group."



**The Noblemen, including founder Al Midgett, lower right, raise money to help kids in need by throwing big parties. Beer is usually involved.**

### **Board meetings in**

many clubs often are bored meetings, stuffy exercises of financial housekeeping and pleas for money. Not here.

Every first Monday of the month, The Noblemen gather at Ellington's On The Boardwalk. For a half-hour at May's meeting, the room was more kegger than meeting.

Guys - this is an all-male club, after all - rooted through commercial tubs of bottles, pulling out their 12-ounce favorites. They milled about, recounting off-color jokes typically heard in club quarters. They ate rigatoni, chicken wings and meatballs. There was salad, too, but it managed to avoid most plates.

At 7 p.m., it was time.

"Sister Al," Nobleman Joe Thatcher sardonically announced to quiet the crowd. "You have the floor."

Al Midgett founded The Noblemen and quit his job to run it. A squat man with a perpetual grin, he's the guy behind the spontaneous giving when a family's house burns down, and he's the force behind such annual rites as Christmas trolley rides to deliver gifts to sick kids.

Meetings are open forums, peppered with candor. A morning fundraiser is no more than an ask-for-money breakfast. If you have 10 tickets to sell to an event, sell the damn tickets. And don't bring up an idea unless it's a good one.

"You've got 100 guys there being honest," said Marcus Holman, 39, a longtime Nobleman. "If you ask for something ridiculous, you get heckled down. You say my secretary's son is very sick and he needs a computer, you can't count the hands fast enough."

Midgett presides over meetings regularly, yet he runs them like he hates it. Prepared speeches are bad. Presentations are short. And at 8 o'clock, the session ends.

"Nobody wants to be here all night," he said.

One-liners come easy to Midgett, but the talk turns serious when it must. At the last meeting, the tone changed for a little girl with a surgical mask and a blue hair clip harnessing her brown hair.

Zoe Walenius, the daughter of Nobleman Shawn Walenius, suffers from a rare disease - as few as 1 in 10 million people have it - that weakens her immune system. The 2-year-old wears a mask to protect her lungs. She has ports surgically inserted in her chest and belly so doctors have easier access to her.

Zoe's parents want to open a foundation to raise money for their mounting medical bills, which now tally about \$500,000. Melodie Walenius can't form a foundation to benefit solely her daughter, so Midgett's gang did it for her. They adopted the cause, called Rhythm of Life. Mom's goal is to raise \$100,000 this year.

"They don't do anything small," Walenius said. "If they're asked to do a small task, they do it, and they do it big."



**Zoe Walenius, 2, who suffers from a rare disease, attends a meeting of The Noblemen.**

**Matthew Midgett**, Al's first and only child, was born 17 weeks early.

The boy weighed 20 ounces at birth. A month later, he nearly died three times on an ambulance ride to Norfolk from Virginia Beach. He needed 17 transfusions in his first three months.

And, it turned out, he was the "miracle that inspired the movement."

Midgett, who turns 50 this August, never intended to be a philanthropist. But like Walenius, he learned that a chronically sick child costs a fortune. Medical bills reached \$560,000, and his job as a regional manager for a heating and cooling company didn't pay that well.

A friend of Al's wife, Marge, set up a fundraiser at the 67th Street Officers Club. It raised \$15,000, a dimple in the face of Midgett's bills. But it launched an idea.

"Let's just throw another party," he thought.

That was 1993. Two years later, Midgett and a small band of friends would meet in each other's living rooms to plan more parties. Halloween blowouts. Beach Blasts. A Red Hot Valentine's Ball.

The Robin Hoods of Virginia Beach, they called themselves. They'd rob the Beach's rich to give to its poor. They changed to The Noblemen in 2006 because a New York group trademarked "Robin Hoods."

The mission never changed.

"If I'm going to be helping somebody, why not have fun?" Midgett said. "And it's a helluva lot more fun if you're hanging with your friends, eating good food and drinking beer."

### **The original Robin**

Hoods were Old Beach townies, guys who thought any place west of Hilltop was out of town. Those same guys are less parochial now, ready to get bigger. Regional, as the buzzword goes.

With a marketing budget that wouldn't cover their bar tab, Midgett is nurturing satellite Noblemen chapters across South Hampton Roads. One could start in Norfolk by year's end.

If the Norfolk group takes hold, it will be because of men such as Barrett Esarey.

The 26-year-old banker got involved in The Noblemen last year after his manager recommended the group. The Willoughby Spit resident liked the idea of raising money, helping kids and doing it without the administrative overhead with which many charities struggle.

Esarey wants to rally a core group of volunteers to shape The Noblemen of Norfolk. He's not sure what events he'll

host or how he'll host them, but he's confident the concept is worth duplicating.

"We've got a good footprint to follow," Esarey said.

Midgett thinks branches of The Noblemen will work, but he realizes he's taking risks to find out.

He quit his job last summer to run the charity full time. (He calls it resigning because it sounds more "noble.") Every day, he digs a little deeper into his family's savings to follow his calling. And he's got no guarantees the group he and a few friends started can be a success anywhere outside of Old Beach.

Still, this "fairly spiritual man" - who named his Back Bay home "Sherwood Farms" in homage to the Robin Hoods - is convinced he can do more.

"Everything inside me tells me this is the right thing to do," Midgett said. "Except my mom. She's scared to death. She worries about the future. I think something wonderful will happen."

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