

# BELIZEAN GROVE: THE WORLD'S ULTIMATE OLD GIRLS' CLUB

In Cartagena, Colombia, inside the walls of the old city sits a monastery. Inside the monastery sits a chapel whose high ceilings and heavy gray stone offer protection from the sun. Now, just as 400 years ago, there are no windows, no distractions—just silence. Beyond the chapel are terraces overlooking the sea, where bougainvillea cascades over balconies and warblers sing with wrens. And a courtyard where ladies succumb as their hair curls in the breeze. They lean back in straw chairs, uncross legs beneath lunch tables, smile indulgently at toucans that strut and lunge for bites of their salad and ceviche.

These women, who seldom relax and reflect, have traded business suits for sun hats and flown thousands of miles to commune with friends. They've been told to reveal themselves and learn, engage, and rejuvenate. So that afternoon, they will stroll and shop and talk, and when their feet are sore and their bodies are tired, they will huddle in carriages, lulled by the clip-clop of horse hooves as they make their way through tangled streets. And when a

man runs alongside them, strumming his guitar, they will be startled. “Beautiful lady,” he will say to a woman who is also a chief executive, “let me sing for you.”

*Never mind* that the monastery is now the Santa Clara Hotel and the chapel was remodeled as a meeting room long ago. In 2011, it was a sanctuary for the Belizean Grove.

Belizean Grove is an under-the-radar constellation of many of the world’s most accomplished, powerful women. Drawn from government, banking, technology, and beyond, its members form a rare elite. Each has been tapped, Skull and Bones–style, by an existing member, and each seeks out and grooms new talent. And despite its low profile, Belizean Grove has fast become the ultimate Old Girls’ Club.

Yet when Susan Stautberg founded the Grove in 1999, she was just trying to get some friends together. Stautberg had always attended girls’ schools, and it felt strange to be surrounded by men in her career. She’d certainly progressed in exciting ways and had been active in female networks, but she wished there were more ways for professional women to really get to know one another. Forming her own group didn’t seem so far-fetched. After all, Stautberg had a history of creating what she found missing in the world.

Upon graduating Wheaton College, she’d begun working at Westinghouse/Group W Broadcasting in D.C. Determined to get on air, Stautberg volunteered on weekends to cover any murder, rape, or suicide that came up, all while finishing her master’s degree in public and international affairs at night. At age 22, Stautberg set her mind to launching a Washington television bureau. “That’s the beauty of youth,” she says. “I thought I could do it.” But her bosses scoffed; they didn’t need a D.C. operation, and even if they agreed, they wouldn’t choose some ingenue to run it.

Stautberg focused on getting her own scoops and ingratiated herself with local television stations up and down the East Coast, gaining trust and support for her idea. When she'd convinced enough outposts, she returned to the honchos at Westinghouse, and in 1972, Stautberg became the first woman and one of the youngest people ever to lead a Washington bureau. Far from murders, rapes, and suicides, she now covered the White House and Capitol Hill.

Stautberg was the first television journalist to become a White House Fellow, one of the nation's most prestigious leadership and public service programs, and she worked for both Vice President Nelson Rockefeller and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, traveling internationally and engaging leaders in both public and private sectors. She concentrated on work and valued her brain over her body, even when male colleagues emphasized different assets. "At various times along the way, whether in the White House and TV bureaus, men would point to the casting couch," Stautberg says. That was one way women could get ahead quickly. "It was very blatant in those days. They'd say, 'You're very attractive and bouncy.' And you'd say, 'Sorry, I'll find another TV station to work for.'"

Stautberg was twenty-nine at the end of the White House Fellows program, when she embarked on her first reinvention. Using the skills she'd acquired in journalism—critical thinking and a yen for information—she launched a career in corporate communications, and at age 32 she married a lawyer for the SEC. When their son, Edward, arrived four years later, Stautberg saw a need to help women navigate new challenges facing her generation.

In those days, she says, women in senior management didn't have kids, and there weren't any guidebooks on how to break the news to bosses, much less manage the transition to motherhood. "I had a geriatric pregnancy. I had my secretary at the hospital, I was

dictating notes, and I was on painkillers. You were back in two weeks,” she says. “You can’t have it all at the same time, but we had to learn that.”

Stautberg wrote some of the first books to address the needs of women managing work and families, including *Balancing Acts!: Juggling Love, Work, Family, and Recreation* and *Pregnancy Nine to Five*. “I joked that it should have been called *Knocked Up on Top*,” she deadpans. “That would have been a better title and sold more books.”

She released her books through MasterMedia Ltd., a combined publishing house and speakers’ bureau she’d founded, where she surfaced the type of material she wanted to read by authors she respected. Stautberg believed women needed to get out front with their ideas, and she would lead by example. She went on *Oprah* to promote her work, but friends soon encouraged her to think bigger. Surely, Stautberg knew about more than just publishing. She was a great connector, constantly learning, exchanging ideas, and match-making on a grand professional scale. Why not get paid for doing what came naturally?

Stautberg leveraged her sweeping network to found PartnerCom, a firm that sources chief executives and assembles advisory boards. While directing that operation, building boards composed almost entirely of men, she realized that professional women continued to face significant barriers. And she attacked this dilemma by calling her comrades.

Women began to gather around the dining room table at Stautberg’s apartment. They had commenced their careers in the 1970s, but twenty years later, female senior executives were still few and far between. There just weren’t a lot of ambitious ladies like them, and they didn’t have ways to find each other, much less help

one another avoid pitfalls and provide tips for success. Friendship required an important investment of time, and these gals were juggling husbands, children, and demanding jobs that required them to travel. In the struggle to keep up, friends often fell by the wayside. But Stautberg knew these trailblazers had similar issues and experiences, regardless of their professions, and she knew they could learn from and support each other, if only they could find the time.

“I always had a dream to start a Bohemian Grove for women,” Stautberg says, referring to one of the nation’s most exclusive Old Boys’ Clubs. That hush-hush group, an extension of the 140-year-old Bohemian Club in San Francisco, has counted so many rich and powerful men among its ranks—including Presidents Eisenhower, Carter, Nixon, and both Bushes—that it sounds like something from a Dan Brown novel. Indeed, the men of Bohemian Grove, who gather each summer under a canopy of redwoods in Monte Rio, California, are credited with facilitating the Manhattan Project.

“I couldn’t afford the redwood forest, but one year I went scuba diving with my son in Belize. I thought, ‘This place is far enough out of the way,’” Stautberg continues. “If you made the effort, took three planes and a boat to get there, you were going to bond. You would really get to know people.”

*Ladies invited to Belize had to be trustworthy and respectful, innovative and engaged, curious and passionate, kind and caring, generous and strong. And they had to be fun!*

In 1999, Stautberg called her friend Edie Weiner, the leading futurist, with an idea. Why not get some ladies together and go to Belize? By that time, Stautberg and Weiner had met a number of fascinating females through the International Women’s Forum and

other organizations of leading businesswomen. Wouldn't it be fun to introduce them?

The two friends decided they couldn't invite just any successful women, and the group ought to be more than an assembly of best buddies. The women had to be compatible and have things in common. Ladies invited to Belize need not have money, but they must have reached high positions in their chosen fields and done it ethically, without stints on the casting couch. They had to be trustworthy and respectful, innovative and engaged, curious and passionate, kind and caring, generous and strong. And, of course, they had to be fun! These women had to be able to laugh at themselves, not take themselves too seriously. Above all, no divas.

Stautberg and Weiner dissected the qualities that made their own friendship so special and set out to replicate them with a wider group. They made a list of friends, and friends of friends, who fit the bill. "It was a lark, nothing major. We just wanted to bring some professional women to meet each other, talk about how to deal with our home lives and careers, how to make the world a better place," Weiner recalls. "It was never intended to shake the world."

Stautberg brought along friends from Washington, like Deborah Wince-Smith, now president and CEO of the Council on Competitiveness, and Marion Blakey, the president and CEO of the Aerospace Industries Association, who before that led the Federal Aviation Administration.

Weiner enlisted her pals, including Marilyn Kawakami, who has been a senior executive at Armani, Ralph Lauren, and Anne Klein, and Debra Duneier, a gemologist and entrepreneur. That inaugural year, twenty-seven women—some of whom had never met, but who trusted Stautberg and Weiner—set off for a remote island off Belize. It was Super Bowl weekend.

## We'd Fought So Many Battles

Barbara Colwell, who is now a consultant, says that in 1999, she had no idea what Belizean Grove would become. “I was fifty-four then, on a corporate board, and I never dreamed of the bonding that would take place. That first year was so magical. When I came home, my husband said he never saw me giggle like that.”

Colwell's first connection to Stautberg and Weiner was professional. After rising to be the highest-ranking woman at TWA, she went to work for Cigna's property and casualty insurance division. She realized she needed help with consumer marketing and hired Weiner to do some forward-looking industry analysis.

Weiner introduced Colwell to Stautberg at a client meeting, and the women hit it off. And in 1992, when Colwell received a letter from Stautberg announcing the launch of PartnerCom, her advisory board-building business, she thought, “How perfect! Because that's what I needed. Cigna had 60 percent of the energy industry, but I had no idea what was keeping executives in the industry up at night. Susan was able to get a cross-section of really leading people across energy—heads of industry and regulatory people,” Colwell says. “That ended up being how I got on my first board of directors. My advisers would go back to their boards and propose me.”

Colwell, Weiner, and Stautberg forged a close collaboration. Together, they worked on issues and agendas, hammered out problems, and tried to do their best work. “They made my career in insurance. Ten years later, I knew I would follow Susan and Edie anywhere,” Colwell says. “There are certain people who are life-changing, and I put both of them in that category.”

So she packed a bag and headed to Belize.

Colwell had a lot of associates in her own industries—insurance and travel—but few outlets to meet people outside. “I was raising

kids, and you don't get to know people at a lunch," she says. "But after three planes and a boat to get to Belize, it was like being on that first season of *Survivor*." She knew she would see each woman's true colors.

The group stayed at a down-at-the-heels resort where cottages were so dark that the women couldn't even read. Instead, they gathered around the pool and hot tub to talk. "It was so natural to share issues with work, our parents, being the sandwich generation with divorces and kids," Colwell says. "Being able to have people there know what you mean, talking about mothers and mothers' expectations, what you were or weren't living up to."

Colwell has five sisters, but she found her relationships with these peers in Belize were special in a different way. "My sisters would be bored to tears hearing my stories because they're not in New York, not in similar industries, and I wouldn't have known what to do with their advice," she continues. "This was like other sisters who are professionals. Many of us heard each other's stories and were moved to tears."

Their trials were different from those of most women. One woman admitted to wearing Depends because her company plane had only a men's room, while another described stuffing Kotex in her bra to hide the fact that she was breastfeeding from male colleagues. On a business trip, she was mortified when the plane's cabin pressure caused her to express milk and drenched her shirt. Where else could they talk about things like this?

Their heartache had its own flavor, too. One woman's house had recently caught fire, and while she stood watching all her possessions destroyed, she heard a neighbor comment, "Well, she's never even home"—as though she deserved to lose everything because she was devoted to her career. Other women were going through long, bitter



divorces. Most were the only female at high levels at work, and everyone had encountered some form of sexism and discrimination.

Colwell could relate, having experienced similar things herself. As she came close to graduating from Columbia Business School, the instructor prepping students for interviews directed women not to wear wedding rings and to hide the fact that they had children. Later, her first boss at TWA told her, “We have good luck making offers to wives of lawyers because we don’t have to pay them so much.”

Colwell was grateful for the Women’s Movement and benefited from the pressure to hire and promote women in the 1970s. But, she says, once women began moving into senior management, “people didn’t know what to do with us.” Once, when she emerged from a presentation to the president of TWA, her boss asked what they’d discussed. “He said what he always said: ‘Nice suit,’” Colwell recalls. “It wasn’t said cruelly. If another woman said it, she’d have meant it. But this president said it because he didn’t know what else to say. I think you get inured to it.”

Colwell remembers TWA in the 1980s as a coarse, rowdy culture where women dressed like men to fit in. “There were always a lot of inappropriate comments. You had to just pretend you didn’t hear them. At least I did, because I wasn’t going to change how they felt,” she says. “We would just get on with it.” She didn’t keep pictures of her sons in her office, and she pretended that having children was incidental to her life for fear higher-ups and colleagues would think she wasn’t focused. Her husband attended PTA meetings and her boys’ school plays since he could duck out of the office without risking the stigma of being distracted by kids. But that caused problems too. “My younger son didn’t like it because he said his dad didn’t mingle right with the mothers,” Colwell says. “He just sat back in the corner and didn’t talk.”

When twenty-seven women came to Belize with their own tales, their own variations on familiar feelings and predicaments, they found a sympathetic audience. At one point, a senior banker gave one of the most poignant speeches. “She said, ‘When I walk into most rooms I know I’m smarter than most of the people there, and I think about whether to keep my mouth closed.’ She didn’t want anyone to know it,” Colwell recalls. “She talked about how out of place she felt as a successful woman, even around other women. A lot of people wouldn’t say that, but with this group it resonated. Maybe because we’d fought so many battles.”

That first year, women from across industries shared their capabilities and discussed what they were trying to achieve. For many it was a relief to be with other Type A gals who didn’t apologize for their ambition and keen intellect. They appreciated those qualities in each other and celebrated their collective success.

“It worked. We talked about some of the grandest global issues as well as the personal things that affected our lives,” Weiner says. “We decided, ‘Hey, let’s do this again next year.’”

## **A Sisterhood, Not a Business Network**

Fourteen years and 150 global members later, Belizean Grove is now much more than a lark. It has gained structure and committees and has evolved to address women’s concerns at a new stage of life. The group has picked up some bold-faced names—including Sonia Sotomayor, who resigned from the Grove when she was nominated as a Supreme Court Justice—and still managed to stay anonymous, with members acting as *éminences grises* around the world.

Yet “Groverers” adhere to their initial goal to unite women across disciplines for friendship and learning. “It’s an instantaneous group of friends who have been in effect prescreened so they have common

characteristics. Many women were the first at what they did, so there's a common experience," says Connie Duckworth, the founder and CEO of ARZU. "We're united in a common set of morals and ethics, a commitment to helping each other and other women."

The women, who are now in their fifties and sixties, may be high achievers, but they insist they are a sisterhood rather than a business network. Many have trouble defining the Grove and often begin by explaining what it's not. It's not a sorority, think tank, leadership organization, engine for innovation, or vehicle for job creation. It's no single one of these things. Rather, it's all of them combined.

Nancye Green, who was CEO of Donovan/Green, a consulting firm, before becoming CEO of Waterworks, says Belizean Grove has always been different from other professional groups. By the time she came to the Grove, in year three or four, she had already been a member of the Young Presidents' Organization for more than a decade. She'd joined YPO when she had a baby daughter, and she remembers its clubby male ethos. Green never felt completely comfortable discussing work/life issues with associates there.

"I was on the board of directors of a well-known U.S. company and got a call from the CEO to discuss an urgent matter. Caitlin had a poopy diaper, but I took the call anyway and I just remember thinking: Guys don't get this part," she says over lunch near her home in Chelsea, in downtown Manhattan. "I remember never feeling in the right place because I always needed to do more for my kids, more for work."

But when Green arrived in Belizean Grove, it felt like coming home. "I very much remember, after having spent fifteen years in YPO, I came back from my first trip to Belize and had never felt so energized in my entire life. It was just intellectual mind candy. Every conversation was deep and interesting," she says. "They got

me, what I care about. When you have an issue, they say, ‘I get it. Here’s my strategy for coping with the same things.’”

Belizean Grove knows no boundaries. Members leave egos and business cards at the door, and their relationships bleed into every area of life. Catherine Allen, who leads the Santa Fe Group consulting firm, recalls that when her fiancé was dying of brain cancer, Grovers opened doors to leading specialists and patient advocates. Then, they supported her as she grieved. “It’s hard to make deep friends at this point in your life, but through the Grove we’ve really made some deep, holistic friendships,” she says. “They’re people to be in business with, people to travel with. These friendships help you in many ways, both in joy and in sorrow.”

*“What happens in the Grove stays in the Grove. If anyone crossed the line, they wouldn’t last very long.”—Penny Peters*

Similarly, when Penny Peters, a marketing and public relations maven, had one of many back surgeries, she couldn’t get out of bed. The night she returned from the hospital, another Grover was hosting a cocktail party, and suddenly Peters’s phone rang. “Have you eaten yet?” her friends asked. They filled a huge platter of food and arrived at her doorstep, eager to continue the festivities at Peters’s bedside. “Trust comes before anything else. People can say anything, talk about troubled children, straying spouses, acknowledge the cancer they haven’t told their spouse about while they get the strength to do it,” Peters says. “What happens in the Grove stays in the Grove. If anyone crossed the line, they wouldn’t last very long.”

Still, as any organization grows and matures, some things change. There are personal matters women might reveal before a

group of twenty-seven that they won't discuss before 150. But Stautberg and the Grove's membership committee take care to ensure that the heart of the Grove—the bonds that united those initial members—still beats.

Belizean Grove remains by invitation only. One or more Grovers tap potential candidates and escort them through meetings with a membership committee whose vetting process is rigorous. It takes more than a C-suite title to be admitted to Belizean Grove. Applicants need four to six people who can attest to their intelligence, character, and sense of fun. As Stautberg puts it: Brains are good, charm is better, kindness is best. "Everyone has a phenomenal résumé to get into the Grove, but it's not about the résumé. It's an organization about heart, soul, and spirit," she says. "You're talking about your hopes and dreams and ways you want to solve the world's problems. So you don't want someone across the hot tub who's going to judge you. There are lots of VIPs who want to be Grovers, but they're just that—VIPs."

To keep their coterie vibrant and varied, each new member must add to the Grove's overall talents, skills, and diversity. Belizean Grove has corporate titans and artists, lawyers and scientists, academics and nonprofit executives, ambassadors and politicians. They don't need any more Upper East Side investment bankers, but they could use a fire chief, police chief, or union leader. Several years ago, the membership committee sought spiritual guides from an assortment of faiths. And to avoid competition or discomfort, only one employee of any company can be a member of Belizean Grove. "Part of the objective is not to hang with our own industry, but rather to have exposure to a much broader constellation," says Michelle Jordan, a Southern California-based consultant specializing in reputation management and crisis communications. "We encourage

diversity so we're able to expose ourselves to new ideas, to meet women from five continents we wouldn't otherwise come across."

Belizean Grove now has a charter and code of conduct and, since its founding in 1999, has had three instances where they've asked someone to leave—situations where members were found to be unethical, had broken trust, or had treated another member disrespectfully. The group accepts no more than twenty newbies each year so it can "on-board," or properly welcome and absorb, each one. New members are assigned "big sisters" who accompany them to meetings and events.

At four-day retreats, which are held in January or February—still on Super Bowl weekend and generally in Central or South America—Grovers introduce themselves at an opening night dinner and are encouraged to mix with participants they don't yet know. Most of the women bunk together, sometimes with strangers so as not to form cliques.

A hallmark of Belizean Grove remains members' insatiable curiosity. Grovers spend mornings in panel discussions based on the retreat's particular theme, which in recent years have included "Complexity," "Shaping Our Future," and "Wisdom and Spirit." Here, members showcase their knowledge, opining on subjects as wide-ranging as military strategy, marine life, philanthropy, and how revolutions in the Middle East will affect the geopolitical balance. While Grovers now invite "global guests," outside speakers who round out the slate, their own members—an assembly of experts—generally populate the dais. Evenings often include a reception at the U.S. embassy with the host country's leading politicians and dignitaries.

"There is a wonderful saying: To be universally interesting, you have to be universally interested," says Stautberg, who weaves

meaningful quotes into nearly every casual conversation. “Grove sessions are like catalysts, with people coming from diverse backgrounds and expertise. Ideas bounce off each other and new ideas come out front. We’re coming to learn and we want to come back rejuvenated, with a new passion and purpose for what we do.”

As Grovers work to better themselves, they also find ways to improve the lives of other women. They’ve created a younger members’ group, the TARAs (Today’s Already Rising Achievers), to integrate talented, motivated women in their thirties and forties. And, at an annual auction that raises more than \$100,000, Grovers bid on consulting engagements and vacations at members’ private homes to sustain the group’s “Adventures of the Mind” foundation, which supports women and girls. In every country they visit, Grovers confer with local luminaries to find the most effective nonprofits, and a portion of funds raised is donated to help that nation’s women.

“I was always the first woman in anything I did, and I’d seen in my career the number of doors shut if you didn’t go along with the casting couch. It would have been nice to have some mentors, so we created a network to make it easier,” Stautberg says. “When you see there’s a problem out there, you think of ways to solve it. You have to go out and create what you want for yourself and your community. You create a path, but leave markers for others to follow.”

Now Stautberg’s markers are seen and felt across the globe, as Grovers return from retreats and bring the spirit of sisterhood to their homelands. “I have learned so much from being part of this group—the friendship, network, sorority. Especially for us Latin American women who are basically coming out of our shells right now,” says Rosy Del Dago, who joined Belizean Grove in 2010 and helped organize the group’s retreat in Colombia. Del Dago, who is leading the construction of a major port in Barranquilla, always

worked in her family business under the thumb of a patriarch. Her father only had girls, so he had no choice but to bring them into his company, but Del Dago says she is finally cutting the umbilical cord.

“We didn’t venture out, maybe because of insecurity. Our professional projections were very narrow. But as we’ve continued educating ourselves and being in contact with other women through social activities, it’s helped us branch out,” she says. “It’s been so enriching to meet women around the world who are professionals, who are fun and willing to share their experiences, help each other out. Now I’m venturing out professionally and doing things beyond my family circle.”

Del Dago has begun participating in a civic association in Barranquilla and is involved with the Spanish Chamber of Commerce in Miami. Though she’s in her mid-fifties and has been on the board of her family business for twenty-five years, Del Dago is just now joining other boards too. She created a foundation to help high-potential Colombian girls in low-income areas, and has begun to gather groups of professional women in Barranquilla once or twice a month. “I got the idea from Belizean Grove and now it’s sticking here,” she says. “We have one friend who’s the first woman mayor of Barranquilla, and we’re trying to get women in many different occupations so we have a wide variety of ideas. We invite our friends from Cartagena. It’s changed my life, my entire outlook.

“Women here are gaining individuality, relying less on traditional family units,” Del Dago continues. “We’ve had to go out and fend for ourselves, and if we don’t find support in the traditional male-oriented organizations, we bond with girlfriends. It helps that our girlfriends are now in positions of power. We lean on each other and grow, and the more strength we have, the more interested we are in making these partnerships. I am not a feminist, but there’s



strength in our numbers. We have a saying here: *No somos macho, pero somos muchas*. We are not men, but we are many.”

### **Any Way of Being a Girl Is Fine**

Tribes need chiefs, and Grovers say Susan Stautberg has always embodied the spirit of Belizean Grove.

Stautberg lives on the seventh floor of a prewar building in Manhattan’s Carnegie Hill, a stone’s throw from Central Park. Visitors are ushered into a living room that is quiet, stately, and formal, decorated in pale yellow and cornflower blue, the colors of tradition. English horse prints hang above Philadelphia Queen Anne and Chippendale antiques, befitting—as Stautberg is—a descendant of Martha Washington.

Stautberg sits placidly, reflecting on her career and the history of Belizean Grove, and in the background one hears the sound of fingers on keyboards, then a whisper and a laugh. There are women working here. But where?

Past a hallway featuring photos of Stautberg with Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Al Gore—she is proud of her days at the White House—ladies once again convene at Stautberg’s table. “Once we had offices in the West Wing, and now we’re at the dining room table!” Stautberg smiles at the eager, unlined faces of employees and interns staffed on her various endeavors: the Grove, PartnerCom, and WomenCorporateDirectors (WCD), an association of women on corporate boards that has fifty chapters on six continents, which she founded in this very same room.

A cluster of young ladies in sundresses, two of whom are the daughters of Grovers, squint at laptops; reach for staplers, paper clips, lollipops, and Advil, all strewn across the table; dig into file boxes stacked on the floor; and hop to the fax, printer, or shredder,

stationed a few feet away. From under a bell jar, a small, rare weather vane of Miss Liberty, with some of its original gilt still intact, watches over the group. “Mother collects antiques and always had it on her farm in Pennsylvania. She gave it to me a few years ago,” Stautberg says. “It’s always an inspiration to me.”

The other end of the long table is set formally for lunch. When the women are ready to break from e-mailing CEOs, drafting speeches, and organizing events, they will take silver in hand, place cloth napkins in laps, and eat sandwiches on Stautberg’s fine china. They might look up to admire sterling candlesticks and bowls of flowers before them. In all the years Stautberg worked in the White House or at 9 West 57th Street, she never thought she’d wind up based at home. But it works.

*Inside Stautberg and her Grovers lives a juxtaposition: that of public and private, professional and personal, stolid and vulnerable, serious and silly. Philadelphia Queen Anne and Chippendale coexist with hot pink and turquoise.*

Travel further into Stautberg’s inner sanctum, past the kitchen with its map of the world, under the flag of Belizean Grove, and into her control rooms. Brace for a blast of color. Back here, where guests would never venture uninvited, Stautberg has transformed maids’ rooms into offices that explode with memorabilia from Belizean Grove adventures: vivid tapestries and devilish masks, flamingoes and painted suns, fish fashioned from coconut shells, a framed wine-stained cocktail napkin. There’s the famous bell Stautberg uses to quiet Grovers, “which is like herding elephants with a toothbrush.” And a photo of Edie Weiner in a spiky wig, singing with the Shirelles at Stautberg’s sixtieth birthday party.

Bookshelves are spilling over. There's a photograph from the redwood forest with a sign pointing to Bohemian Grove. A card picturing two old broads with saggy boobs, pink hair, and martini glasses is displayed beside a note from Sonia Sotomayor. The whole suite is painted hot pink and turquoise.

At first it's a shock, as if two siblings—the straight arrow and the black sheep—still occupy the same turf. How could these rooms, with their muddle and whimsy, belong to a blueblood Colonial Dame? Yet maybe that's the point. Inside Stautberg and her Grovers lives a juxtaposition: that of public and private, professional and personal, stolid and vulnerable, serious and silly. Philadelphia Queen Anne and Chippendale coexist with hot pink and turquoise.

"That's the essence. We meet very successful women every day and there's one face on them. But it's seeing beyond that public facade and allowing her to be a whole person, to show her hot pink and turquoise. When you put both parts together, you get an incredible explosion," says Theresa Behrendt, who befriended Stautberg thirty years ago in Washington, D.C., and is now a political fundraiser and co-owner of a horse-racing enterprise. "The creativity, the partnerships, people who have formed businesses, written books, introduced each other to husbands. This is all Susan Stautberg."

Many Grovers see the open, accepting nature of their sisterhood encapsulated in the unique friendship of Stautberg and Weiner, whose backgrounds could not be more different. Some say they represent yin and yang, serving as a magnetic force to draw diverse women together.

Weiner grew up poor in New York and was sent to live in foster homes when her mother, who had multiple sclerosis, could no longer care for her three children. "Edie talks about having everything she had in a box, ready to go to the next foster home. It was so

hard that she didn't have a mother," Barbara Colwell says of her life-changing friend. "Edie is all heart with no hang-ups about class or anything. She's brilliant, honored all over the world, and just cares if you're a good person."

Stautberg, meanwhile, went to prestigious prep schools and belongs to tony clubs in Manhattan and Newport, Rhode Island, where her family owned The Elms, one of the historic mansions on Bellevue Avenue. But an upper-crust upbringing never stifled her sense of humor. Every summer weekend at her elite beach association, Stautberg joins a dozen friends for water aerobics and, to combat the boredom of treading water, each must arrive with a new bawdy joke. Weeks in advance, Stautberg finds herself trolling the Internet for quips, and by Labor Day she's filed away enough wisecracks to last her all year. Just as with her beloved quotes, she delights in disrupting amiable chitchat with a zinger. Stautberg isn't one to go to the barricades; she'd no sooner burn a bra than a book. Hers is a quiet subversion, and she agitates from inside the establishment.

*In Belizean Grove, women babble in nonlinear ways, delighting in tangents that would get them booed out of Harvard Business School.*

"Susan is a Republican. She looks like the most corporate or political person, but she takes all sorts of risks. She herself is such a combination of business and pleasure and fun. And Edie is an Independent who often leans Democrat. She's wild, outspoken, out there," Nancye Green says. "The group is filled with color and texture. In the Grove, any way of being a girl is fine."

So Belizean Grove moves, in character and practice, in concentric circles outward from Stautberg and Weiner. It embraces members

from every religion, race, socioeconomic background, and political persuasion, from Communist to Tea Party. The ladies pride themselves on being a model of civility. “You can sit any two of these women down outside the Grove and they would disregard each other because they’re on opposite ends of the political spectrum,” Weiner says. “But when they’re at the Grove, they’re thinking about how can we help each other achieve, or how can I help share what I know to make life easier or better for you.”

In Belizean Grove, women babble in nonlinear ways, delighting in tangents that would get them booted out of HBS. In one breath, they’re discussing the influences of nanotechnology, and in the next they’re talking about where to get their nails done. “We can go back and forth from business to personal. In a paragraph we can do four different topics. It’s ‘I love your necklace,’ then we move on to careers,” Stautberg says. “It’s ‘I have this problem. How are we going to solve it?’ We try to be brave about whatever it is.”

Speaking of necklaces, Stautberg often wears elastic bands of bright beads—hot pink, yellow, turquoise, and green orbs, each painted with a cocktail glass, the sun and moon, an airplane, flip-flops, palm trees, and shells. All symbols of Grovers at rest. “Men have their ties, and we have our jewelry. You can see another Grover and know it.” Stautberg’s eyes soften and she grins mischievously. Jewelry isn’t the only frivolity embraced by these women who, because of their public positions, have to be buttoned up most of the time. For Belizean Grovers, excitement doesn’t mean noisome cavorting—the widespread drunkenness, peeing on redwoods, and dressing in drag reputedly favored by their Bohemian counterparts. The ladies prefer emotional bonding to bacchanal. But that doesn’t mean they can’t have a little fun, and the Grove is their place to let loose.

Since the night members wore wigs to startle the U.S. ambassador to Belize, hairpieces and flamboyant hats have played a starring role at retreats. Reverend Sylvia Sumter, the senior minister at Unity of Washington, D.C., church, recalls donning a big blond wig and hand-me-down bustier while delivering a spiritual talk at her first Grove weekend. “There’s a tradition passed down when you’re new. At the end of my talk, I got to pick the newbie who would wear it the next year,” she laughs. “These things are necessary. We’re showing a willingness to be vulnerable, exposed, honest, and authentic—in addition to the talents and wisdom and skills everyone brings.”

Prominent women in wigs and bustiers is, well, goofy. But that’s the idea: to access all parts of their personalities, especially the light and silly ones kept under wraps in their high-powered lives. Weiner likens it to seeing a politician you admire at a roast or costume party. You realize she is more than a public persona. She is a human being.

“There are things we do that help us say, ‘Hey, this world is bigger than all of us.’ We laugh and don’t take ourselves so seriously. We can point to each other and say, ‘I love you, you’re nuts,’ and that helps form this deep commitment, a feeling of ‘I would lie down in front of a bus for you. Prove to me you don’t think you’re queen of the world and I will be there for you,’” Weiner says. “When you take a diamond, you can’t focus on any one facet. No two women or diamonds are alike. We try to create a program once a year for us to get to know each other before we’re scattered to the wind, to hit on all the facets of these diamonds.”

Many portray Grove retreats as lifetimes, with a full range of emotions, compressed into weekends. There are times to celebrate and times when people cry. Together, Grovers dance like no one’s watching.

## I Got–You Got

Bohemian Grove’s motto, “Weaving Spiders Come Not Here,” which advises members against actively promoting themselves and pursuing business, applies to Belizeans as well. Belizean Grove is not meant to be commercial or transactional, but if it all sounds a bit “kumbaya,” think again.

Grovers form a power base. They serve on the boards of companies like Goldman Sachs Bank USA, NASDAQ, Nordstrom, DSW, PetSmart, and REI. Members also include movie producers, a Canadian senator, a presidential candidate in Peru, and the former COO of the Episcopal Church. These gals are in positions to make things happen.

Inevitably, because business is such a big part of their lives, work is discussed and plans are conceived. In the early days, Stautberg encouraged Grovers to stand at retreats and voice their asks and offers, what she calls *I got–You got’s*. Women would request what they needed—be it help with their careers, buying tables at a charity event, a nanny or summer internship for their kids, or a date with a fabulous man—and put forth what they might share with others. As the Grove expanded, *I got–You got’s* migrated to the newsletter, but members say this exchange of favors happens organically all the time, as women share news of their undertakings.

The ladies have written books together, formed companies together, invested together, and helped members break into that final bastion of male rule, the corporate board. They’ve also mentored and hired each other’s kids. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of examples of Grovers opening Rolodexes and wallets on each other’s behalf. Grovers can’t always connect the dots or point to one person who provided the necessary rocket fuel to succeed. They don’t promote themselves, but their projects seem to come

together. They hang out, they mention things, and wheels are set in motion. “There’s something about female energy—feeling like you’re planting seeds all the time. Your value is connected to the value you create, whether with children, people who work for you, whom you mentor,” Nancye Green says. “Once we’ve helped each other, it’s intensely satisfying.”

Grovers also guide each other through periods of transition. Pernille Spiers-Lopez, who left Ikea in 2011 after twenty-one years, says the Grove gave her the courage to branch out. “I don’t think I would have made this decision if I didn’t have a network of people to work this through with. The Grove helps you ask the questions, dare to do something different. And if you do, you know you’re not alone,” she says. “I’m not walking off a steep cliff. I’m taking a break, and there will be support along the way. I have no fear because of this network of people behind me.”

Spiers-Lopez believes many people would love to change their lives and livelihoods, but stop short because they’re afraid. They are plagued by existential doubts: Will I still be relevant? Will I be forgotten? Who am I without a title? As opposed to other professional networks, Belizean Grove doesn’t equate members’ worth with their occupations.

“Other business networks see people as the job they hold and how useful they are to you. The great heart and strength of the Grove is that it’s full of people who’ve made and are continuing to make great achievements, but it’s not commercial or transactional. There’s a broader, richer value system,” says Jane Diplock, who chaired both the executive committee of the International Organization of Securities Commissions and the New Zealand Securities Commission, and who sits on the board of the Singapore stock exchange. “If you don’t know what the Grove can offer, you



don't miss it. You don't realize these enormously beneficial relationships get people to take charge of their destinies, which is different from getting the next job on the ladder."

## Here Come the Women

Penny Peters has a summer birthday, but her Grover friends began calling in March. They needed to pin down dates when she would be available for a party. It was, after all, her sixty-fifth.

In June, Peters planned to be in Beijing with Barbara Colwell for a WomenCorporateDirectors event, and then she would race to New Mexico for the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market with another group of Grovers. Peters had neither time nor energy for fanfare, but her pals insisted on a party and she reluctantly agreed. Then she promptly forgot.

When Peters returned from China, she was surprised by voice mails and e-mails from Grovers saying, "See you Tuesday."

Tuesday turned out to be an assault of New York summer—hot, humid, raining on and off—but the Grovers decided to meet outdoors anyway. Peters was due in Central Park at 6 PM, but she was jet-lagged and late and couldn't find the pants she wanted to wear. She still hadn't unpacked from her trip. She looked for wine, or anything she could contribute to the festivities, but her cabinets were bare after weeks away. She grabbed some candles and walked out the door.

As Peters followed the path from West 81st Street, clouds began to lift and part, and the sun came out. Suddenly it was bright, and when she caught sight of her friends, she gasped. There, on a spit of land stretching into a pond encircled by tall grasses, the women had laid a patchwork of colorful blankets. Along the perimeter they'd placed makeshift tables, cardboard boxes covered with red, yellow,

and blue plastic cloths. There were hors d'oeuvres, cheeses, salads, vegetables, pastas, chicken, and ribs, not to mention turkey meatloaf sandwiches from a Grover's husband's secret recipe and a homemade three-tiered cake. To Peters, it looked like a 1970s potluck wedding banquet. Everyone had brought something special.

*This is the true spirit of Belizean Grove: women who have been business partners and dearest friends, who take pride and great joy in teaming up to improve lives and communities, who use their collective power for good.*

Peters has been collecting shawls since she was twenty years old, so as a tribute guests were told to wear some sort of wrap. Since it was hot, they'd decided instead to drape and weave the fabric through branches of surrounding trees. When Peters lifted her gaze, she saw ribbons of pink, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and gold.

She descended into a field of family and friends, abuzz in the shadow of Belvedere Castle. But before Peters could even put down her bag, she was engulfed by a gaggle of giddy ladies. When they finally dispersed, she was wearing hot pink zebra sunglasses, a pink and purple sparkly tiara, and a purple feather boa—an ensemble she sported all night. She directed her fifty guests with a glow-in-the-dark magic wand.

It was the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, but fireflies were already emerging. Lights from the Delacorte Theater twinkled on the horizon, a reminder of Peters's lifelong love of the stage. It felt like a scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

This, Peters says, is the true spirit of Belizean Grove: women who have been business partners and dearest friends, who take pride and great joy in teaming up to improve lives and communities, who

use their collective power for good. These women are like sisters, their bonds like blood ties. She knows they will see her through the rest of her days.

Peters was raised in the classic Jewish tradition and taught to repair the world. Men do it independently, while women do it in packs. So, she wonders, what happens when these coffee klatches and quilting bees are unleashed on the globe and given a new platform? What happens when women bring this caring, collaborative spirit into business? What ensues when the sisterhood infuses the workplace, when Grove-like connections multiply?

“It’s not just about what women will achieve for themselves. It’s adding women to the mix *with* men. It’s about having two styles of problem solving simultaneously. It may help us win back a place for our country. It means we’ll have better promise for our children, greater social welfare and understanding, a healthier planet and environment, *and* economic success,” Peters says. “Because we’ve been functioning on half a brain. Men have been doing a fine job, but they’ve just been doing half. . . .

“Here come the women.”