

## Red-Hot Menopause Mama

Lawrence & Memorial fund-raiser has  
'well-healed' women in  
stitches of laughter

By Julie Wernau  
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According to Rose Weaver, "White women are the ones shamelessly talking about their vaginas in public." All she ever wanted to do was talk about menopause.

At Lawrence & Memorial Hospital's annual Well-Healed Woman conference, 800 ladies gathered at the Mystic Marriot Hotel & Spa in Groton to be loaded up with yogurt smoothies, hard candy, fine dining and speakers with one thing on their mind: women's health.

Among those gathered at the event, a table full of red-hatted ladies and purple outfits stood out from the crowd. "Red Hat Divas," a Connecticut chapter of the Red Hat Society, is the "result of a few women deciding to greet middle age with verve, humor and elan," according to their Web site. They were some of the first on their feet as the laugh-out-loud, one-woman show, "Menopause Mama" by Rose Weaver received a standing ovation.

Weaver, 55, metamorphosed from middle-aged woman to young school girl or aging man, with the use of a few simple props, a creative change of voice, and some interesting headwear. "It's all out of the closet now," said Weaver, dressed as "mama," a soulful, brazen woman in the throes of menopause.

She covered it all -- hot flashes, lubricants, chocolate cravings, sagging breasts and the difference between "fact and fable" -- in an in-your-face style reminiscent of Eve Ensler's "The Vagina Monologues."

Joanne Lotreck, 60, of Norwich and her fellow divas giggled with glee as they admitted to relating to Weaver's playful journey into menopause.

"I started crying singing 'Frosty the Snowman,'" Norwich resident Lotreck recalled, smiling as she pictured the look on her husband's face as he saw the tears stream down her face.

Despite the comic package her message comes in, Weaver said that like Ensler, she hopes to cover some serious themes that society, as yet, hasn't dealt with.

"If I can get this positive word out about aging, it's going to change the face of America," Weaver said. "Why is it so un-talked about? ... Wouldn't it be great if we could just let it out?"

When her fellow red-hatters were at first shy about bringing up their own menopause experiences, Betty Garvie broke the ice, saying, "Come on, I bet you've all tried Astroglide."

In a five-minute-long segment about menstruation, Weaver covers the secrecy and shame women feel about their bodies, which Weaver said in an interview that women have learned to "medicalize" rather than accept. "We're convinced that we have to take something to 'deal with it,'" Weaver said. "Menstruation is medicalized too."

Women were once forced into seclusion to squat over moss in huts, says a wise, older woman, cane and hourglass in her hands and attitude written all over her face. Now, they just use "sanitizing sticks." "What a crock," she says, cackling over the audience's roar.

The Curse. The beast. The visitor. The Cardinal. "My whole life is in 15-day fragments," says Emily, a 15-year-old girl taking her mother's tampons and pads to the homeless shelter, a role Weaver plays with the help of removable pigtails, a backpack and cell phone. "People run away from me 15 days out of the month."

The story weaves around an invented petition, which asks its signers for four things: A single aisle at the grocery store for menopause-related items (older women on the covers of all the fashion mags), education about women's health that focuses on fact instead of fiction, "for men to just say IT," and for women to be referred to with respect.

Weaver said she hopes to see "pro-aging" items on store shelves. She may buy anti-aging cream and special vitamins during and after menopause, she says, but there's no reason that she should have to feel bad about herself while she's doing it. To prove it, "mama" lovingly slaps a little of her underarm flab on stage.

The Red Hat Society follows the lead of Jenny Joseph's poem, "Warning," in which she celebrates old age with the statement, "When I am an old woman I shall wear purple/With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me." This was for many of the women the second menopause-related show they'd gone to see together. "I found out about the Red Hat Society by seeing 'Menopause the Musical,'" said Groton resident Sandy Eddy, who would only say she was "over 60." With all their red hats in the audience, she said, it was hard to miss them.