

GLOBE MAGAZINE

Dull Men's Clubs are growing. In Massachusetts, there's a twist.

Ironic men's discussion groups are growing around the state, with pointless trivia and ordinary lives on the agenda.

By **Benjamin Cassidy** Updated January 22, 2026, 6:00 a.m.



Dull Men's Club participants gather in January at The Center in Holliston. ADAM GLANZMAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Amid a wry round of applause, a commotion breaks out at the Dull Men's Club in Holliston. Organizer Ed Payne has just revealed the winner of "The Dullard," a quirky trophy awarded to the group member who attended the most meetings in 2025, when two men who *aren't* the recipient of this dubious honor suddenly rise to their feet. One has just spilled hot coffee on the other. The room is quieter now, as an apology and clean-up are both underway.

"Never a dull moment," a third party quips.

The coffee gaffe qualifies as excitement — and comic material — for this ironic men's discussion group held every Friday inside The Center in Holliston, formerly known as

the Senior Center. The Dull Men's Club explores a wide range of topics, provided the two-dozen or so men in attendance follow some simple guidelines. "Be respectful to all. Be courteous to all. Allow all to speak," says Payne, 75, sporting a tie-dyed sweat shirt. A gray cap bearing the words Dull Men's Club rests in front of him, next to his name card. "Keep it relatively clean, gentlemen. Politics and religion should be discussed someplace else."

The retired cabinetmaker didn't make up these rules himself. At the request of The Center, Payne helped start this group last January after visiting a similar gathering in Southborough. He was astounded by the breadth and depth of topics covered there, as well as the group's camaraderie, and wanted the same for his hometown of Holliston.

At a time when many deem loneliness to be an epidemic, and masculinity to be in crisis, Dull Men's Clubs across Massachusetts are on the rise. The Holliston group is one of three new in-person branches established in the Commonwealth during the past year alone. The clubs draw their name from a verbose online community that numbers more than 2 million on Facebook. Still, rather peculiarly, Massachusetts has added a physical dimension to this digital movement, unmatched elsewhere: a dozen documented in-person clubs are hosted around the state, with another nearby in Portsmouth, New Hampshire; only a smattering have started outside New England.

"You've got a phenomenon going on," says Dull Men's Club founder Leland Carlson, who sometimes goes by the pseudonym Grover Click and splits his time between the United States and England.

Payne copied the Southborough group's format and name, and even the room setup. He invited experts on everything from artificial intelligence to rhododendrons. He encouraged attendees to speak about obscure topics. And he ensured coffee and

doughnuts were always available. Still, would anyone show up for a meeting marketed as mundane?

As it turned out, 53 men would stop by at least one of the Holliston gatherings over the course of a year. They came early and often, to the point that Payne changed the meetings from bimonthly to weekly, enlisting volunteers Steve Nault and Fred Dolan to lead when he couldn't make it. They made and ordered name cards and gray hats; attendees brought odd objects and observations and jokes — lots of jokes. At the core of the club is a humility seemingly in short supply these days, delivered one personal anecdote — or wisecrack — at a time.

At this first meeting of 2026, the group's leader had a gag of his own to dispense. After a brief introduction, Payne unveiled the “The Dullard”: a penguin statuette with a ball in its mouth. Then he handed it to his friend Joe Connor, the “dullest of the dull.”

The retired engineer accepts the award with wincing gratitude. He was a pioneer member of the Dull Men's Club Holliston branch, at the urging of his friend Payne, who didn't want to be the only one at the first meeting. Payne told him to bring “whatsits” — objects for an adult form of show-and-tell — in case conversation dried up.

But Connor found the discussions to be rich and enlightening. In this unassuming environment, a poet or plumber could feel comfortable lending their perspectives on any number of topics. “An engineer looks at something, and he has one take on it,” Connor says. “A farmer looks at it, and he has a totally different take on it.”

Their diverse experiences raised the fundamental question that Connor hears at the supermarket these days when he's wearing his “DMC” hat: *What, exactly, is a dull*

man?

Photo Gallery: Meet the members of Holliston's Dull Men's Club

The website of the original Dull Men's Club describes a dull man as anyone, regardless of gender, who can "delight in ordinary things, things that many people think are dull." The club's Facebook members post about riveting topics such as the misalignment of a building corner's edges or the number of liners around Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. One post from March 11, 2024, contemplated the unlikely smoothness of a freshly opened Mars Bar — it generated more than 15,000 reactions and a BBC News follow-up story.

Local "dullsters" have recently brought attention to, among other things, a peanut-shaped roundabout in Worcester; the vintage interior of a lobby at Newton-Wellesley Hospital; and the number of fence posts surrounding Fresh Pond in Cambridge (1,302, apparently).

The club started as a joke in the late 1980s. At a bar inside the New York Athletic Club in Midtown Manhattan, Carlson and his friends were paging through the gym's magazine, admiring the daring activities it offered: wrestling, judo, fencing, boxing. One of them observed that they didn't do any of those things. Another reflected that their lives were quite dull.

Instead of shunning this monotony, however, Carlson and his friends embraced it. They decided to start a "club within a club" — a Dull Men's Club that would celebrate

the esoteric to an absurd degree. Activities included racing elevators and reviewing park benches.

Carlson was fascinated by the ordinary — and people's obsessions with it. "I collect collectors," he says, rattling off people he knows who are infatuated with milk bottles, post office boxes, and potholes. In the mid-1990s, his nephew built a Dull Men's Club website where Carlson could document people's quirky passions. (He also dedicates an annual calendar to his favorites, devoting each month to a different obsession, and hands out an annual award to a particularly obsessive collector or hobbyist.)

A couple of grieving widowers are responsible for giving a digital trend a physical face. Twenty-six years ago, Connie Church and Joe Collins formed a men's discussion club at the Pembroke Council on Aging after the deaths of their wives. But they didn't want this gathering to sound like a bereavement group. While pondering a name for it, Collins came across the Dull Men's Club online.

Collins found the concept amusing and received permission from Carlson to use the group's name and logo at his local gathering. The meetings quickly ballooned.

"It gave him a new lease on life after the death of my mother and enabled him to meet some wonderful men who have become wonderful friends," Mary Collins, the eldest daughter of Collins, once wrote in a letter to Carlson.

Holliston Dull Men's Club leader Ed Payne (left) with "Dullard" award recipient Joe Connor. ADAM GLANZMAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The group got another boost in 2013 when Bill Harrington, a retired president of a

firm that designed and built trade show exhibits, decided to start a group in Southborough, inspired by a meeting he attended in Pembroke. Eight people attended at first.

Thirteen years later, however, nearly 40 men clad in black-and-gold “DMC” hats and golf shirts sit in a banquet room at the Southborough Senior Center for an early January meeting.

Members have, for instance, flown a medical helicopter in Vietnam, played the viola in the Boston Symphony, and served as a school principal.

“You’ve got people who are leaders in the community, or have been,” says Chris Robbins, a US Army veteran and retired marketing manager, who attends the Southborough meetings. It isn’t, he says, just a bunch of guys looking for a free cup of coffee.

A certain irony always attends these meetings: The breadth of experiences and interests in the room make the gatherings inherently compelling. “The whole thing is kind of tongue-in-cheek,” Harrington says.

On this morning, attendees weigh in on an upcoming local vote and Harrington’s new electronic corkscrew. But the conversation, at times, veers from the lighthearted into the deeply personal. An update on a member who’d just endured triple bypass surgery. Someone recovering from pneumonia.

Robbins, trying to hold back tears, shows everyone a folded American flag that had been placed on the coffin of his beloved late uncle, a veteran like him, who’d died recently at 99.

Robbins felt comfortable sharing this keepsake with the group, he says later, because of the “camaraderie” they’d built over many meetings together. He joined about seven years ago, well into retirement, at a friend’s recommendation. “In retirement, all of a sudden all the people you work with are gone,” Robbins says. “So, unless you’re active in the community, it’s a quiet neighborhood.”

Some members of the Holliston Dull Men's Club wear a cap with the club's ethos: “Celebrate the ordinary.” ADAM GLANZMAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Most of the Massachusetts clubs hold their meetings at senior centers to attract, as one group puts it on its Facebook page, “men of a certain age.” This often leads to poignant conversations. The Dull Men’s group in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, for example, frequently discusses death and dying, from the intricacies of 911 responses to family squabbles over estates.

Many members have experienced significant losses. After Roman Polny’s wife of 65 years died last year, a friend recommended that he seek out the Holliston group. “I came here, and I said, ‘I’m not the only one who’s grieving,’” he says. “It just helps you get through the day or get through the week.”

“There’s a lot of widowers here,” Harrington, the Southborough group’s organizer, said at a recent gathering. “This just gives them a place to go during the week, and a good opportunity to meet with other people.”

His comments reflect broader concerns about the effects of social isolation and loneliness. An analysis of the National Health and Aging Trends Study published in 2018 estimated that older men are significantly more socially isolated than older

women.

In 2023, the US surgeon general declared loneliness an epidemic. “It is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death,” Dr. Vivek Murthy wrote at the time. “The mortality impact of being socially disconnected is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, and even greater than that associated with obesity and physical inactivity.”

Last January, a Pew Research Center survey found that about one in six US adults feels lonely all or most of the time. Yet older adults are significantly less likely to report feeling lonely than those under the age of 50.

Robbins, of the Southborough group, thinks young people could learn quite a bit from what older “dull” men share with each other. “I do everything I can to never miss it because the stature and the level of experiences are just extraordinary,” he says. “Everybody’s got a story to tell.”

Holliston fire Chief Michael Cassidy talks about fire safety with members of the local Dull Men's Group. ADAM GLANZMAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

After awarding the Dullard trophy for best attendance, Payne introduces Holliston fire Chief Michael Cassidy (no relation to this writer), who has brought his own “whatsit” — a Halligan bar that firefighters use to pry open and break down doors — as well as some advice on fire safety. Audience members pepper him with questions about alarms and dispatchers and fire blankets.

Their queries may sound like IRL approximations of what one might find in the

Facebook group's comment sections, but few of them are aware of the Dull Men's Club's digital existence or ethos. "We did a survey to see how many of our dull men were on Facebook," Connor says of the Holliston group. "There are three."

One of them is Brian LaPerle. At 52, the Ashland resident is one of the group's youngest regular attendees. He worked as a diesel mechanic before a machinery accident crushed his legs, leaving him disabled. "It was kind of boring, just sitting in the house, watching TV all day long," LaPerle recalls.

His wife encouraged him to join the Ashland Dull Men's Club, which launched in 2025. LaPerle met Payne there and began attending Holliston's gatherings, too. While older guys might be shy at first, "With me being still in my 50s, I don't mind talking," LaPerle says.

Though he's a member of the Dull Men's Club on Facebook, LaPerle doesn't think he'll ever post there. "Those guys have the quirkiest pictures," he says. At the same time, he notices that so many others relate to the posts, and now they don't seem quite so strange to him.

Payne went through a similar transformation after attending his first Dull Men's Club meeting in Southborough. When Harrington told him that, for many, the gathering was "the highlight of their week," Payne didn't believe him. But now he sees this phenomenon firsthand in Holliston. "Thank you for giving me a place to go," one told him.

And that's not all it's good for. "Guys, we don't say it," Payne says wryly, "but we do like to talk."

Benjamin Cassidy is a writer from Newton. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.



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