

Forbidden fruit?

Kansas naturists grin and bare it despite cool reception from outsiders

by Brittany Stevens

May 11, 2012

MANHATTAN, Kan. - In the lamp lit, forgotten back corner of a Kansas City, Kan., coffee bar, a man sits in a worn leather armchair and swigs a beverage while explaining his choice to live life in the nude. Unaware patrons check email, catch up with friends and sip their morning coffee within earshot. The barista switches on the blender.

“Just because I’m dressed, does not mean mentally I’m not a naturist,” Mike, 33, said in the crowded hipster café. “Naturism – it’s implied – is more of a philosophy, not just going nude, but also respect for others, respect for yourself and respect for the environment ... Being involved in naturism, there’s a feeling of acceptance.”

On the surface, outsiders see a videographer, independent filmmaker and sports blogger decorated with degrees who is passionate about sports and active in local county government and national politics, but when not in the public eye wearing his blue jeans and T-shirts, Mike lives clothes-free.

Although Mike may feel accepted among other naturists, social nudity is taboo in American society. Naturists often face intolerance from spouses, family, friends, the law, religion and members of the “textile community” for their lifestyle choice.

But, a naturist’s beliefs run deeper than a nudist’s, Mike said. Nudism is about shedding clothes; naturism is about shedding the confines of society and transcending it. Nonetheless, the terms are often used interchangeably in the U.S.

No one in Mike’s family and few of his friends know about his belief in naturism.

“They have no clue,” Mike said.

Mike is a member and the public relations membership officer of the Heartland Naturists, a Kansas City-based, “family-friendly” naturist organization. Heartland is one of four naturist organizations in Kansas, according to MapMuse, not including a fifth non-denominational camp, Camp Gaea, that is also open to naturists.

At naturist camps (colonies are considered an offensive term within the naturist community), members and guests can participate in recreational activities like volleyball, shuffleboard, gardening, hiking, swimming and camping, among others.

Mike said he happened upon naturism in college when he read the book, "Social Nudism in America." Soon after, he began reading naturist publications. In 2005, Mike attended his first naturist swim put on by Heartland.

“I was nervous at first,” Mike said. “I took my clothes off and was very comfortable very shortly afterward. I will never wear a bathing suit again. Once you swim naked, that’s it; you’re in it for life. It

feels free.”

The bare essentials

The feeling of freedom is one reason out of many why naturists choose to disrobe.

According to Mark Storey, a philosophy professor at Bellevue College in Washington and a practicing naturist, the motivations for naturism are culturally conditioned.

“You go to the United States ... well, it’s the freedom: it’s the freedom from clothes; it’s the freedom from oppression; it’s the freedom from a sense of shame, or it’s the liberty I have of having the wind and the sun on my skin. Americans just love liberty,” Storey said.

However, in Germany naturists tend to go nude for physical well being, while in France, naturists shun clothes in order to equalize class distinctions, Storey said.

The American Association for Nude Recreation (AANR) advocates going nude recreationally to relax, relieve stress or boost self-esteem.

Whatever the motivation, Storey said deep down people are unclear as to why they like naturism; he purports his own theory.

“As social beings we need to communicate with each other socially,” Storey said. “Clothing can – to some small degree – alienate us from others, from the natural world, from God, if people are spiritual. So, to that degree, by getting rid of clothes, we de-alienate – to some degree – our relationship with other beings, so we’ll actually be able to flourish and thrive a little bit better naked socially.”

At Heartland’s events, discarding apparel casts away the social hierarchy of the textile world, Mark Partin, Heartland’s treasurer, said.

“Nudists, in general, are made up of a cross-section of society,” Partin said in an email interview. “And likewise, the Heartland Naturists are made up of people from all walks of life.”

Heartland has hosted executives, nuclear physicists, lawyers, engineers, college students and clergy members from various faiths, Partin said.

For Mike – someone who was harassed in high school – naturism has been a way to overcome years of alienation.

“I do definitely feel comfortable with myself and my body,” Mike said. “Wish I was a little better looking, but I think everybody wishes that ... There were times when I’ve had my body image questions, as well; I was bullied much of my school.”

Like Mike, many naturists have used social nudity to cope with their body hang-ups.

“I didn’t like my own body very much,” said Irene Whittman, president of the Sandy Lane Club Inc. seasonal naturist resort in Hutchinson, Kan. “Now, I’m comfortable with it. It’s something that has really helped me grow as a woman – to be able to say, ‘This is me. This is what I am, and if you don’t like it, that’s your problem, not mine ... None of us are really Barbie dolls; we’re all ourselves.’”

Through naturism, Whittman said, she came to terms with her weight and scarring from a previous heart surgery.

“You would be amazed at how many people, young and old, have scars from appendectomies and various operations,” said Bob Morton, the executive director of the Naturist Action Committee (NAC) and chairperson of the Naturist Education Foundation (NEF). “We’ll normally wrap that pretty tightly and keep it covered, but if you don’t keep it covered, is somebody going to stare? And that answer is not at all. They just shrug and say, ‘I’ve got two of those myself.’”

In an article titled “Does being nude help overcome body image issues?” in the March issue of Bare Facts, the official monthly publication of the Lake Edun Foundation Inc., a naturist organization located in Topeka, Kan., the editor suggested going nude – not necessarily among others – to improve self-image.

“The ruin in people’s lives abound, unseen and underreported,” the editor wrote. “Eating disorders, billions spent on self-improvement products, a diet industry and millions of miserable men and women are the direct result of our disordered thinking about the human body ... maybe all we need to do is strip down.”

Nicky Hoffman, owner of The Naturist Society, a national naturist organization, witnessed this ruin when her daughters were teenagers.

Page after page in the magazines her daughters read were airbrushed models – society’s image of perfection. The eldest daughter was thin, while the youngest struggled with her weight.

When Hoffman first began practicing naturism, she used it as a teaching platform for her daughters.

“This is the only body you’re ever going to get,” Hoffman said. “I wanted my girls to know that they were O.K. just like they are.”

N magazine, which Hoffman acts as editor and publisher of, portrays the naked body as is, without airbrushing.

Many naturist parents share Hoffman’s sentiment and bring their children along with them to naturist camps, which are often labeled as “family friendly.”

To some members of the public, like Nikki Craft, a political activist, they appear as anything but. Craft has created a website dedicated to what she said " lifts the curtain on pedophilia, swinging, pornography and sexual exploitation, in her opinion, inherent in the nudist and naturist communities.

In order to prevent depravity in their organization, Heartland keeps a close eye on newcomers, performs background checks and asks for photo identification at the door before events, Mike said.

Naturism proponents frequently cite scientific studies conducted by Marilyn Story in support of their argument for family naturism.

In 1979, Story conducted a study of 264 three- to five-year-old children whose families were either social nudists, “at-home-only nudists” or non-nudists. It was published in the "Journal of Social

Psychology."

Family nudism for preschoolers, Story found, had a higher correlation to increased body self-concept than did geographic location, sex or race. She also found that children living in nudist homes scored higher on body acceptance, self-concept and self-image than did the children not living in a nude family setting.

"Watching young children, they're natural naturists," Hoffman said. "They want to run around naked every chance they get."

David Hopkins includes perversion in his article for Listverse, the "Top 10 Misconceptions About Nudism". He also lists asexuality, no sense of privacy, illegality and sexual stimulation, among others.

While some outsiders distrust the naturist way of life, the alienation has brought members of the naturist community closer together.

"We support each other because we share a common challenge – enjoying a wholesome activity that most of the public doesn't understand or has misconceptions about," Partin said. "These misconceptions are perpetuated by the porn and marketing industries to make money, and the general public accepts what they see in advertising as the truth. Nudists share the common bond of seclusion and persecution, so we are more readily accepting of people in our community."

'Welcome to my world'

Protecting the children was what it came down to according to former state Rep. Cindy Hermes of Kansas when she proposed House Bill 2726 in 2000. Had the bill passed, anyone contributing to the functioning of a nudist club, resort or building – considered a "common nuisance" – would be guilty of a misdemeanor.

The bill was directed toward Lake Edun Foundation Inc. of Topeka, Kan.

"Webb's [owner of Lake Edun] neighbors have been trying to get his operation closed for years," Morton, the executive director of NAC and NEF chairperson, said.

It was a neighbor of Lake Edun who came to Hermes and asked her to do something about the facility, Hermes said.

Although the bill said otherwise, Hermes said she had less severe intentions than shutting Lake Edun down.

"The outcome that I wanted was to be able to sit down and talk to the people that owned Lake Edun," Hermes said. "What I wanted was a fence or some trees. The reason that I wanted that is because the kids on the school buses sat up so high they could see the individuals; it just wasn't quite right."

Hermes said because Lake Edun is located in a residential area, during social events a member would occasionally wander to their car parked alongside the street while in the nude. With children in grade school at the time, Hermes said she wanted to protect them.

Looking back, Hermes regretted the "wild" ordeal.

“Live and let live,” she said.

Now, Lake Edun currently runs as a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) agricultural facility where members can go nude on the property.

“I have no doubt that the political environment in Topeka will change one day, and that politicians will finally understand that a nudist resort is a wholesome family environment,” Partin, Heartland’s treasurer wrote in a 2011 article “Heartland Naturism” for N magazine. “Until then, heartlanders will continue to enjoy social nudity in a responsible and legal manner, while attempting to educate the public and lawmakers through example.”

Although the bill did not pass, a Kansas statute incorporates an indecent exposure clause.

According to the Kansas Legislature, indecent exposure is defined as “publicly exposing a sex organ or exposing a sex organ in the presence of a person who is not the spouse of the offender and who has not consented thereto, with intent to arouse or gratify the sexual desires of the offender or another.”

By definition, naturists believe in what Morton said is a naturist’s signature phrase, “Nude is not lewd.” Without sexual intent, naturists could legally be nude under Kansas law, yet cities within the state have enacted anti-nudity ordinances with increased restrictions.

“The Supreme Court has ruled, when it comes to obscenity – and that’s really what we’re talking about is obscenity laws in some respect – is that there is a fine line between freedom of speech and a community’s authority to establish its own rules concerning what it considers obscene, what it considers permissible,” said Lt. Josh Kyle, the public information officer for the Riley County Police Department.

Up until ten years ago, when the Manhattan, Kan., anti-nudity ordinance was enacted, residents could walk the streets nude and it was not unlawful, Kyle said.

The Manhattan, Kan., anti-nudity ordinance (Article V, Section 22-59) states, “It shall be unlawful for any person to knowingly, intentionally or recklessly, appear in a state of nudity in a public place.”

The city ordinance, which is only in effect within city limits, was written at the same time as exotic dancing establishments were trying to set up shop in the city, Kyle said.

According to the Riley County Police Department, in the last five years, there have been 22 indecent exposure offenses in the City of Manhattan.

When anti-nudity ordinances arise, constitutional rights come into question.

“If wearing a T-shirt with a slogan on it is protected by the First Amendment; if wrapping yourself in a flag is protected by the First Amendment, then why should being nude not be protected by the First Amendment?” Morton asked.

Var VacationsAs a board member of the Naturist Action Committee, the political adjunct to The Naturist Society, Morton is in charge of a geographical territory, which includes the State of Kansas. According to him, there have been cases in Kansas where people have been nude in public without the

intent to arouse or gratify sexual desires, yet they have been castigated for being nude.

“This is something in the naturist community we know,” Morton said. “We know of the hypocrisy between the way the law is written and the way the law is enforced ... if you think that’s unjust, you’re right. Welcome to my world.”

Although there is disagreement about anti-nudity law, some naturists offer a compromise.

“Public nudity per say certainly does not harm anybody ... That said, I’ve got to be one of the biggest nut job advocates for public nudity around,” Storey, a philosophy professor at Belleview College, said. “If a society, for whatever irrational reason, is really really uncomfortable with nudity, I think a society has a right to be able to say hey, we’re going to put limitations on what people get to do.”

Before the Fall

Like nudity’s relationship with the law, the topic of religion and nudity is another realm naturists and non-naturists disagree upon; within each group there is also dissent. The question is posed whether religious and naturist philosophies can coexist.

From the Biblical perspective, naturism is “unwise” for four reasons, according to Kai Blakeborough, the worship pastor at Crestview Christian Church in Manhattan, Kan.

Prefacing his analysis, Blakeborough said, “I think that the Biblical perspective first and foremost is to not judge or look down on people who practice nudity. You have to analyze the action separate from the person.”

Analyzing the action of nakedness, Blakeborough said, four Christian values come into play:

- 1) Intimacy: Nakedness is intimate and is best shared in the context of marriage, he said.
- 2) Community: “If you are living in a nudist community, you do run the risk of secluding yourself from the rest of the world, and we’re called to engage the world as Christians. That puts you in a precarious position to do so,” Blakeborough said.
- 3) Authority: “In terms of if they were breaking laws and ordinances, then that’s not really God’s plan for how Christ followers should interact and respect the government,” he said.
- 4) Harmony: By practicing social nudity, naturists take a chance of living in disagreement with others, Blakeborough said.

And the topic is a sensitive one; an online message board on the topic of Christian naturism ignited a debate lasting two weeks.

“The folks have itches and they hunt around until they find teachers to scratch the particular itch, by wresting scripture and misinterpreting the Word of God,” a message board member named Caretaker said. “The Bible emphasizes modesty. It is immodest to walk around with ones privates exposed. It is a lack of respect for God, for ones family and ones self to be naked in public, and to indoctrinate young children in immorality ... We are to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ lest we be found naked.”

But, Christian naturists, like those on www.naturist-christians.org, express a belief in core values that contradict Caretaker's opinion.

"It is naturist in that it supports the right to live life nude while not appealing to deviant sexual impulses," according to www.naturist-christians.org. "It defends the right of all persons to be clothes-free, shame free, and accepting of their body as God created it, and of parents to raise their children with those values, seeking a healthy balance of self-esteem and respect for the wider society."

A stereotype naturists work against is that naturism is about sex.

"It's also a misnomer that these are orgies," Morton said. "That's not true. On the other hand, naturists are not simply sexual. Where do you think all the little naturists come from? Really what you'll find is a very healthy attitude, a very normal attitude, a very forgiving and accepting attitude, and why wouldn't you want that?"

Heartland tries to debunk the stereotype by listing what the organization is not for prospective members searching their site.

"Our organization is NOT (and will not be) a sex club, a dating service, a singles club, or a swingers club, so if this is what you are looking for please go elsewhere," according to Heartland's website.

To deter accentuating the body, and thus sexualizing it, Heartland bans genital piercings in addition to blatant sexual activity.

The intertwined realms of sexuality and nudity are where things get even more problematic, Blakeborough said.

"I don't think that they could ever be completely separated," he said. "When push comes to shove, as a biological and spiritual instinct, I don't think that they will ever be able to be 100 percent distinguishable from one another, in spite of their best intentions to do that."

Because nudity and sexuality have been socially constructed in concert, many people new to naturism worry about becoming sexually aroused.

"One of the things that men ask me is, 'Will I have an erection?'" Morton said, who works on behalf of the NAC and NEF. "That's probably the number one question; it never really happens."

If it does, the American Association for Nude Recreation (AANR) recommends covering with a towel, jumping in the pool or turning over, according to the AANR website.

Nevertheless, while Blakeborough said there is no verse in the Bible that reads, "Do not be naked," scripture with references to nakedness have negative connotations.

The website www.naturist-christians.org lists at least 15 Bible verses the organization claims support naturism, one of which being the story of Adam and Eve.

To this, Blakeborough said: "As a blanket statement, I would disagree with how they apply these verses to their situation. A lot of them are a stretch to connect them to their cause. You could say they were taken out of context in a lot of these cases."

He said while Adam and Eve were nude, it occurred before sin entered the world; it was after the Fall they were clothed.

Mike, who was raised Roman Catholic, had once tried to mesh his naturist beliefs with Mormonism and then eastern thought, but now has rejected religiosity instead for spirituality.

“There is a spiritual bent to naturism that God created us naked, so being naked really is a way of respecting God’s creation,” Mike said.

Storey, a philosophy professor at Bellevue College, said the attack on naturist beliefs is a religious impulse exacerbated by key voices in Christianity, Islam and Hinduism publicly deeming it immoral.

“Of course, you can ask why do they say it’s wrong?” he said. “That just pushes the question back.”

Along the same spectrum?

Clothed and unclothed persons might be closer to one another than they think, Morton said.

“It’s not necessarily a discontinuity there because how people choose to decorate themselves,” he said. “Some people consider that their natural state is an adequate decoration . . . the two are not really incompatible; they’re just different parts of the same spectrum.”Stevens, Brittany - Computer-Assisted Reporting

Even within naturism a continuum exists. Some naturists like to live in the nude full-time except when in public, others prefer to be nude in the comfort of their homes, and still others enjoy seasonal nude recreation.

Non-naturist vacationers are taking the plunge, too.

The Ypartnership/Yankelovich National Leisure Travel Monitor conducted a poll in 2008 and found that one in ten adult Americans ranked a nude recreational resort as one of their top travel priorities, called a “nakation,” as cited in Chris Santilli’s 2008 Chicago Tribune article.

But, until nudity becomes less taboo in society, naturists will continue to live in the nude within the confines of their homes, camps shielded by trees and fences, and international resorts.

Mike said if he had one thing he wished outsiders could understand about naturism it would be: “We’re not any of these stereotypes. We’re just like them. We just prefer to not wear clothes from time to time.”