

# In the buff: My evening spent — nude — with the Heartland Naturists nudist community

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## Buff

*Editor's note: Two of the people quoted in this story are described only by their first initial or first name in order to protect their privacy.*

On a cool, gray evening I entered an indoor swimming facility about 45 minutes away from Lawrence to meet up with the Heartland Naturists, a group that practices nudism. Adrenaline shot through me as I prepared for what I thought would be a wild night of skinny dipping.

Since its inception in 1982, the Heartland Naturists has been a group for those who want to experience life without the typical threads. The members of the community participate in a wide range of activities; one night they'll socialize in a coffee shop, the next they'll jam out to '80s music while doing jello shots — all of this completely nude.

For one night I decided to follow their lead and see if the freedom of nudity would overtake me or if I would fall victim to embarrassment.

I had no experience with anything like what I was walking into. In the high school locker room, guys tried to dress as quickly as possible. At home, clothing is the only acceptable option. Inside my dorm, the shower is the only place I'm ever nude.

To see how comfortable people were with leaving all their clothes behind and stepping into the pool was odd. I knew what would happen, but — similar to how Hunter Mickelson is never as tall as he is when he is standing next to you — the Heartland Naturists were never as naked as they were until I was among them.

Inside the swimming facility, there was no turning back. The longer I chose to stay clothed, the more I would stand out. Before I could talk myself into anything else, I undressed and got in the pool.

The initial feeling is one of personal shock. “Am I really doing this?” I thought to myself.

I bobbed around in the water, taking in some of the faces surrounding me. People chatted each other up about the recent events in each others lives and said hello to those whom they’d missed the past couple weeks. There were men who looked like TV politicians, couples who looked like they were from a bad romantic comedy, and someone else who looked like my brother's best friend from college.

It was an overwhelmingly normal group of people, which shouldn’t have been a shock — but it was.

My first encounter was with a fellow student, L. A junior, L. had been a member of the group since the spring.

“It’s just fun being nude,” L. said. “I never really understood what the big deal is. Back when I was in Germany there were magazines out in the open with nudity in them. In America [being nude] is such a big deal.”

L.’s friends around campus are unaware of L.’s nudist habits, but at the end of the day, L. said secrecy is no big deal.

“I’m just not an open book that opens up about everything,” L. said. “No one ever really asks, and I just tell them I’m going out.”

“Some people in here keep this away from their spouses or other people like that in their lives,” said Scott Haines, the group's PR director. “A lot of people don’t get what it is that we do here. Most people think it’s one big sex orgy when the truth is there is nothing sexual about what we do. We just like to be naked.”

He added: “Anytime I’ve told a girl about this, things have gone downhill pretty quickly.”

Ray, a man in his 60s who told his family about his membership with the group, was disregarded by his children when he opened up about his lifestyle.

“I told my daughters and they just don’t get it,” Ray said. “They can’t really comprehend what it

is I do so they don't really speak with me anymore."

The general sentiment among the group: Other people can't seem to comprehend the freedom of the people inside of the group. They can't fathom a group that sees each other nude more than they do clothed and has no sexual desire for each other, Haines said.

I'm not one to step into people's minds, but the only reason I can imagine people having such a visceral reaction to people coming out as nudists is that they haven't seen it themselves. Sure, it's easy to see the group as a place to fill sexual fantasies if you've never been there. But even if you spend the smallest amount of time with the group, all predetermined conclusions will go by the wayside.

The people of Heartland seek the same thing as anyone else in the world: They want to be accepted for who they are and for doing what they choose to do with their free time. The group is nothing more than a social community that gets together to have some fun with people who have similar tastes.

The group itself is a diverse set of people who are the most open-minded and kind people I personally have spent time around. They took interest in who I was even though I was just a writer looking for a story. They invited me to play volleyball and were open and honest when I asked questions. They didn't want me to see what they experience; they wanted me to experience it for myself.

After the swim wrapped up, the group reconvened at a restaurant. If you didn't know any better, the Naturists seemed like office employees who had just put in a late night. People talked to their kids on the phone, asked each other about where they'd gone to college and collectively groaned at the Royals' loss.

The Heartland Naturists might not be the group you're looking for. They weren't the group I was looking for. I was hoping to report back with crazy stories of how nudists love to flaunt their bodies and get crazy, but instead I left meeting great people, many of whom ran into real road blocks because of how they've chosen to spend their free time.

I went in expecting to meet people I never considered as normal humans. But I left wishing everyone could be as human as the people I had just met.

The Heartland Naturists' next event is the Heartland Hangout at Hawk's Nest at the Memorial Union on Saturday, Oct. 10 at 10 a.m. RSVP to [info@heartlandnaturists.com](mailto:info@heartlandnaturists.com).