

Nudist group that began in Lawrence shows fun, relaxation to be had in a body

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Reporter Shaun Hittle

The group hosts 5K runs, swim parties, potlucks and other social gatherings.

“We have some pretty boring events,” said Kansas City-area man Mark Partin, 38.

But the key difference for the Heartland Naturists is that they check their clothes — all of them — at the door.

Over milkshakes and french fries at an area restaurant, Partin, along with two other members, Mike, 64, and Greg, 57, who asked not to use their last names, talk openly about their group and the frequent misconceptions people have about being a nudist.

For nearly three decades, the group, which started in Lawrence in 1982 and currently has about 50 members, simply provides an outlet for area people who like to go au naturel.

“A lot of people think it’s got to be an orgy going on,” Mike said. Instead, it’s just “talking, conversation.” They typically don’t have alcohol at events, and most of them wrap up before 10 p.m., he said.

Members range in age from children who attend with their parents, to senior citizens in their 80s. Some are government workers, accountants, and they even had a pastor for a while.

“It’s a mix,” said Partin, who’s been a nudist for 20 years.

The origins of the group date back to the early 1980s, when on hot summer days, hundreds of nudists could be found lounging at Lake Henry, now part of Clinton Lake State Park, said Webb Garlinghouse, one of the original members.

“I don’t think I saw a swimsuit there,” he said. However, the lake was eventually closed by the state of Kansas, Garlinghouse said, and members began looking for other places. Some gravitated toward Topeka and the nudist-friendly campsite, Lake Edun, while others, like the Heartland Naturists, moved toward Kansas City.

Keeping it family-oriented

In order to make the events family-friendly and free of any sexual nature, the Heartland Naturists screen anyone interested in joining. There’s a phone interview and criminal background check before anyone’s allowed to come to an event, and first-timers must show identification.

“We’re pretty strict,” said Nicky Hoffman, president of the national Naturists organization, of which the local group is a chapter.

There’s even an etiquette sheet for the 100 or so chapters — with more than 10,000 members — scattered across the country.

Motivations for being a nudist differ in the local group. Some say it's about promoting a healthy body image. For others, like Jean, a 30-year-old area woman who attends with her husband, it's just a laid-back, social experience.

"For us, it's more of a relaxation," said Jean, who was originally skeptical when her husband first convinced her to attend a nudist event seven years ago. "Everyone's friendly."

And the group doesn't necessarily have an agenda to push, Partin said.

"It's not a political cause," said Partin, though the members do work at educating the public on nudism when they can.

Mike, one of the senior members of the group, said he's often surprised when others have a difficult time understanding the group or their motivations for being nudists.

"It's just fun and pleasant, and don't deny yourself," he said.

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