

# Radical Sensualists

*Like any community, the leather community embraces a diversity of lifestyles; like other sexual minority communities, the leather community must struggle for the freedom just to be*

by Inga Sorensen • photos by Linda Kliever



Front row: Bear (left), Joseph Hanley; back row, from left: Dash, Roland Bynum, Rose, Jeff Rose, Barry Burns, K.T. Chase and A.J. Johnson

**K**.T. Chase grew up in the rural enclave of Lima, Ohio, surrounded by horses and sumptuous leather riding gear.

"I can remember loving the smell of leather even when I was a little kid. And I liked riding horses, too. There was something about having that power and control over a huge animal that could literally crush me at any moment. The sensation was almost electric."

As a youngster, Chase, now a 42-year-old artist, would hungrily slip into her brother's leather motorcycle jacket the second he stripped it from his body. And it wasn't simply because it matched her spiffy tomboy suit of that era: hi-top Keds, Levis and T-shirt with candy cigarettes rolled up in the sleeve.

"It was because I have *always* had a fetish for leather—its weight, its feel, its smell. It's like a second skin," she says.

Chase also got a charge out of role-playing, and doing things that had sadomasochistic overtones—like tying her twin sister to a tree and leaving her

there, or dripping warm candle wax on her skin and savoring the sensation.

"I've exhibited various forms of fetish behavior throughout my life," Chase candidly admits, "from sadomasochism, to sensory deprivation, to role-playing. At least for me, it's pretty much been an inherent feature of who I am. I describe it as being differently pleased."

Given her early predilections, it's no surprise that Chase, in all her pierced and leathered grandmotherly glory—she is indeed a grandmother, a fact that even she sometimes has trouble grasping—would eventually become ensconced in the leather/SM/fetish community.

That descriptive may sound alarming to the uninitiated, but Chase and others involved in the leather/SM/fetish community—and there are many people representing all sexual orientations, genders, economic, cultural and racial backgrounds—will tell you that leather/SM is about erotic exploration, heightened sensitivity, creativity, costume, sex, fun,

trust, "safe, sane and consensual activities," communication and community.

It is not about abuse, rape, beatings, cruelty, oppression, coercion or nonconsensual acts.

"Whether you're into leather or latex or shoes or French maid outfits—it's a way for you to express yourself," says Chase. "Leather means different things to different people. It's very personal."

Leather can have a regional flavor: black-studded biker leather, for instance, is popular in big cities and on the East Coast. The farther west you travel, the more brown leather, i.e., cowboy gear like chaps and stuff, gains in popularity.

According to Jeff Rose, Mr. Portland Leather 1993, one doesn't even have to own leather to be leather.

"It's not the actual garment," says Rose, 37, who moved to Portland in 1979. Like Chase, Rose was reared in rural America, raised on his uncle's farm in Oklahoma's Buffalo Valley. Rose's uncle was a racehorse trainer.

"It's more of a personality or attitude," he explains. "A lot of it has to do with being honest with oneself and with others."

When Rose got to Portland and began earning a living, he purchased some practical items "like a washer and dryer." But the next time he saved a few dollars, he cheerfully treated himself to a leather jacket. Today he touts ownership of three leather vests, chaps, various harnesses, and a collection of leather bow ties.

"Leather is a lifestyle," says born-and-bred Oregonian Susie Shepherd, a 46-year-old legal secretary. Shepherd is Chase's life partner. The couple, who live in Northeast Portland, have been together six years.

"Some leather people do SM, while some leather people are totally vanilla," she says. "Being leather might mean seeing a police officer and really getting off on the uniform. Being leather is a lot about

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