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local news

Weekend utopia

A pool of dedicated women join with the Lesbian Community Project to revive Women in the Woods

by Inga Sorensen

Jesse Jordan vividly remembers the moment she found heaven on earth. "It was at Women in the Woods. It was like nothing I had ever experienced before," says the lively Jordan, now 55.

After a five-year hiatus, Women in the Woods, a women-only, summer weekend retreat, is being revived by the likes of Jordan and other enthusiasts.

Beginning in the late 1980s, the gathering, which is held at Breitenbush Hot Springs Retreat and Conference Center near Detroit, Ore., was sponsored by Phoenix Rising Foundation, a Portland-based social services agency geared toward sexual minorities. However, after a handful of years the event fell by the wayside due in part to a personnel shift.

Lesbian Community Project has taken over primary sponsorship of the event, which requires a minimum of 100 women in order to create a closed-camp, women-only environs for the weekend. (Jordan says if that number is not met, the whole shebang is off.)

An estimated 60 women have signed up thus far for the re-emerging Women in the Woods, slated for Aug. 22 through 24.

Breitenbush, immersed in the deep greens of the forest, is a 1930s hot springs resort with cabins and a lodge where vegetarian meals are provided.

"When Phoenix Rising was doing it I went every year," says Jordan. "There was such a sense of safety and spontaneity and connection. It's like utopian living."

And quite a relief for Jordan, who had been married (to men) three times prior to coming to terms with her attraction to women. To be surrounded only by women—the majority of whom were lesbian—was for Jordan a transformative experience.

"It was so jarring to leave after the weekend. Here you are with this peacefulness and incredible energy and then you have to step back into the real world," she says. "Until then, I didn't realize how much we were deprived of in our daily lives."

She says one year Cherry Hartman, a licensed clinical social worker, conducted a 50-women-strong hypnosis session on the lodge floor just hours before the scheduled exodus in an effort to prepare everyone for the cultural jolt.

"We needed it—trust me," she laughs.

So what exactly happens at Women in the Woods?

According to Jordan, the weekend kicks off with a short orientation on Friday night by a Breitenbush staffer. Women go around the room, each sharing her interests or aspirations for the weekend. Maybe she'll talk about what kind of project (if any) she wishes to work on during her time there.

"It's very fluid. You don't want to over-organize because it takes the magic out of the experience," says Jordan, who works for the Juvenile Rights Project, a Portland nonprofit law firm.

"Workshops are created on the spot and a large sheet of butcher paper becomes a Living Sched-

ule, expanding and shifting throughout the weekend. The natural hot pools are available into the night. The air is crisp and the stars seem 10 feet above you," she says.

"An artist should definitely bring her watercolors or whatever medium she works in," Jordan continues. "The environment stirs creativity in the most uninspired. If you prefer a quiet, meditative time to pursue your own spiritual path, there is the sanctuary—a round building with a large round skylight. Always quiet. Always peaceful. Always safe and accepting."

LCP board chair Pam Monette, who also previously attended Women in the Woods, adds: "It's such a wonderful community event—to be able to come together and relax with women. There's a certain magic. And it's not just Breitenbush that possesses that magic, it's the gathering of women during that weekend."

Jordan says her favorite hangout is the lithium



The (s)wimmin' hole at Breitenbush Hot Springs

steam house, which she describes as a small wooden house built over a lithium hot spring with a bathtub filled with cold water "right outside for a quick cool-down dunk."

She says, "I always count on meeting Patty and Linda there—two other lithium steam aficionados. It's funny, but I never seem to run into them anywhere else. I still remember a long discussion I had eight years ago with Patty about Stephen Levine's books on death and dying. The steam was so thick you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. That was my personal magic."

Women in the Woods, Jordan adds, "provides whatever each one of us wants or needs—solitude or companionship, a spirited athletic game or a leisurely stroll, irreverent humor or spiritual meditation."

The cost for Women in the Woods is \$160 per adult for two nights and all meals. Children age 4 and younger may come free of charge. The cost for kids between the ages of 5 and 10 is \$80; for those 11 to 15 it's \$120. Child care and youth programs will be provided. Those who can pay more are encouraged to do so to assist women with limited incomes. Make checks payable to LCP, PO Box 5931, Portland, OR 97228. For further information, call 282-8090.