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CULTURE

Women in the Woods

Soaking up some fun with the dykes

BY NATALIE SHAPIRO

Every August, 120 lesbians descend on a remote hot springs in western Oregon. This phenomenon is the annual Women in the Woods gathering at Breitenbush Hot Springs near Detroit.

WIW was started in 1984 by a Portland woman inspired by the annual Radical Faeries gatherings. Except for a five-year hiatus because of monetary problems, the camping event has occurred yearly with enthusiastic attendance.

The mission of WIW is to provide lesbian-focused events for women-born women. Its goals are to provide a safe, nurturing environment for supporting lesbian culture and to bring together women of diverse races, ages, cultures and economic and educational backgrounds.

Breitenbush is the ideal location to achieve these goals, Jesse Jordan explains. She is a member of the WIW organizing team, whose official name is Sensual Women Attaining Teamwork, or SWAT.

"Breitenbush is a magical place," Jordan says. "It's a beautiful old-growth forest with hiking trails, and the whole place is at a hot springs."

The healing hot springs themselves are a reason to visit Breitenbush. "After a couple days, you are cleaned up of any toxins," Jordan attests.

Women also experience a community that is completely self-reliant. "They generate their own power from the river, have an organic garden and produce geothermal heat," Jordan says of the 40 people who operate Breitenbush.

Besides soaking in hot springs and hiking, what is there to do during the four-day gathering? Expect an unstructured experience, the SWAT team says. This is a welcome relief from the average woman's hectic, structured life.

Events unfold with varying degrees of spontaneity. "We don't plan the workshops—they just happen," Jordan says.

One year, a woman wanted to talk about sex. "80 women showed up!" Jordan says.

Workshops and discussion groups are created by the participants. For example, if someone wants to talk about relationships, she simply writes down a time and place on a schedule in the lodge, and most likely women will show up.

The key to WIW is to relax and be spontaneous. "You can do anything! You can be alone, socialize, do workshops, art," Jordan says. "Last year was so funny—we had a Talent/No Talent Night." And they even played Who Wants to Be a Lesbian Millionaire.

With all the fun, WIW still has its problems. The biggest is food. Several campers complained last year when bell peppers inadvertently ended up in the food. (Sounds harmless!)

Getting 120 dykes to agree on the menu is next to impossible. Participants send in details on any special dietary needs along with their registration form.

"We have people send back pages on what they can and can't eat," Jordan laughs. "One woman seemed to be only able to eat lettuce and plain rice."

The solution is self-service food bars with potatoes, burritos and salads. Jordan's girlfriend, Keri Salim, owner of the North Portland restaurant Chez What, plans the vegetarian menu. "Every year we fine-tune it some more," Jordan promises.

So far the only complaints about sleeping accommodations concern snoring. Several camping options are available: spaces for women's own tents, pre-pitched tents and 1930s-era cabins and rooms in the lodge that are wheelchair-accessible. On that note, Jordan explained a downside of the event: None of the hot tubs are wheelchair-accessible.

The demographics of WIW participants



The SWAT team at play

have changed though the years. Past gatherings saw a higher number of older women, but that has reversed.

Sometimes the age gap is evident. "We had a game show where the older ones wrote the questions," Jordan says. "The younger ones didn't know the answers. So this year the younger ones will help write the questions."

WIW also is evolving beyond the annual event. At last year's gathering, a participant noticed many "gray-haired beauties." She organized a workshop called "Age vs. Sage" for women older than 50, and younger women also were interested in attending to see what was ahead for them. This group has continued to meet throughout the fall and winter.

Another new idea is slated for next year. "This will be a bridge between the Radical Faeries and the WIW events and will attempt to create a space for everyone," Jordan says. ☐

This summer's WOMEN IN THE WOODS takes place Aug. 23 to 26. Registration is \$250 for four days and three nights or \$185 for three days and two nights. Special accommodations can be arranged if planned early. For more information and to obtain a registration form, call 503-284-0722 or e-mail womeninthewoods@hotmail.com.

NATALIE SHAPIRO is a Portland free-lance writer.

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