

Swinging and polyamory

Don't even think about saying it's the same thing

You've seen the ambiguous sign and, if you're new in town, you probably wonder what the heck it means. It's the Ace of Hearts, and it's where Portland swingers go for fun.

A mostly straight sex club, the Ace is a pretty no-nonsense wham-bam piece of the action. Nothing wrong with that. But don't go calling it poly. Think of it as a subset.

"We dabbled a little bit," says Rich, a participant in the January meeting of the Polyamory Circle. "But it's a very, very different mind-set."

His partner, Daria, agrees. "They don't care to know your name."

They met another couple at the Ace of Hearts they liked once, but when they suggested meeting them outside its protective walls, they were rebuffed. Says Daria, "They're like, 'No...we want to be totally anonymous; we don't want to know you out in the real world.'"

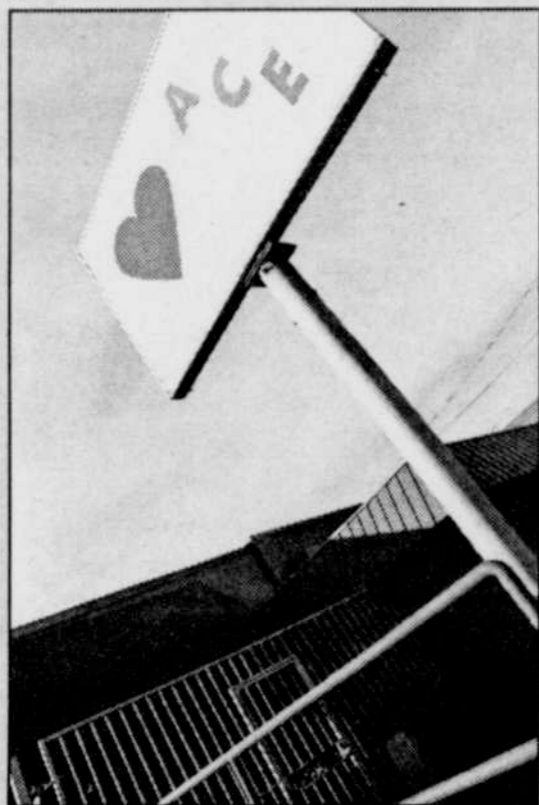
The next time they were there, she continues, "The guy ends up being in line behind us, and he was acting like he didn't know us—until he couldn't find his ID...he was like, 'They know me!'...I was like, 'No, we don't know you, you didn't want to know us!'"

Rich and Daria are ultimately looking for someone they can both connect with. "The definition of the word—'polyamory,' many loves. We're looking for love," Daria remarks.

It's a difference between knowing someone and simply having sex. "The paths may cross," notes Aaron at the same meeting, "but they're different paths. If you put a label on it, swinging is about sex; polyamory is about relationship building."

Aaron's own family extends to "10 or 15" people, and that can include sex, but not solely. "We're all family, and we all play together in every aspect of our lives."

"And," adds meeting participant George, "you know each other's names." **J**



The Ace of Hearts, at Southeast 39th Avenue and Powell Boulevard, caters to the swinging crowd

Three's Company

Continued from Page 23

thing," Kristen says, "but she's really honest."

They began seeing each other regularly in response to what Lisa calls "love at first sight." Kristen, 30, wasn't concerned about Lisa's marital status because "I thought, 'She's really cute, and I'm single and not looking for a relationship. We'll just date, we'll have some fun...she's married, so I can be sure that it's not going to be anything serious.' That was six years ago," she laughs.

After a few months, Kristen relates, "She told me she loved me and that she knows I love her too 'cause she wouldn't feel that way if I didn't feel that way about her. I just started to cry 'cause I knew it was true. And then, what do you do with that?"

You start a polyamorous relationship.

"As they got a little more involved, I could see that it was good for Lisa," observes Will. "She was happier. I could see it was something that I couldn't give her."

But after a year, Lisa and Will were both tired of Lisa's continual absences from home, and Kristen's living situation was breaking down. They decided to have Kristen move into their Southeast Portland home.

None of the three had done any research on polyamorous lifestyles or knew other poly people. "I had no frame of reference," Kristen says. "If we were doing it right...you just kind of have to go with your gut."

When she moved in, she admits, "I was just

terrified." Both Lisa and Will "were very accommodating," she remembers, adding with a smile, "and I was very demanding."

But when polyamory doesn't come to you naturally and you don't have 10 years to get used to the idea, there are bound to be problems. "You used to have one person you had to keep happy," says Will. "Now you have two. So it's twice as hard. Lisa had it the worst; she had to keep both of us happy."

Kristen had jealousy problems right from the start. "I'm not jealous that she loves someone else...you realize

"You used to have one person you had to keep happy—now you have two. So it's twice as hard."

—Will, whose wife has another partner

that it doesn't take any of the love that they feel for you away...it's the socialization of the monogamy of the sexual act. That's what gets a lot of people."

Still, she stayed right where she was, learning to cope and becoming a complete member of the family. Lisa and Will's son, now 14, saw her as sort of a second mom;

Will's daughter, now 19, thinks of her more as a "big sister." They came out a little at a time to close friends and relatives, who accepted Kristen as Lisa's partner.

As for Lisa, she admits the new family relationship was "difficult" but ultimately worth it. "I wanted to all be together in one house; that was my family. This weird thing that I knew would happen to me one day," she grins. "Six years later, she's still my wife."

But last year, Kristen and Lisa decided Kristen would move out.

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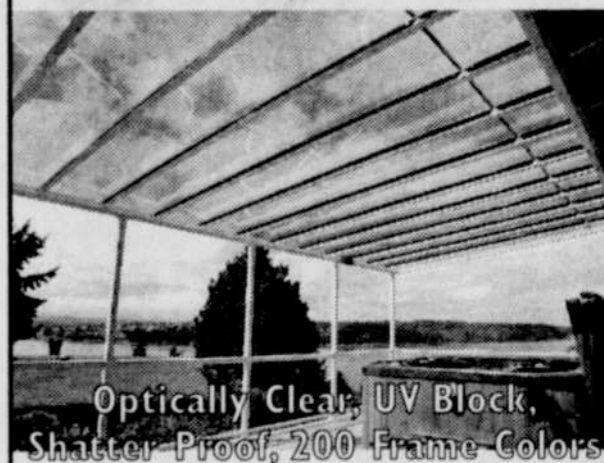
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