WE GO PLACES:

Several members represented Twin Oaks at the Heritage Harvest Festival (heritageharvestfestival.com) at Monticello. HHF was started by Ira-X. Our member Purl was there demonstrating how he makes his gorgeous hand-crafted chairs, we sold hammocks, and our sister community Acorn was there with their heirloom organic seed business Southern Exposure Seed Exchange (southernexposure.com). A group of Oakers met up with hundreds of thousands of other people for the People’s Climate March in New York City. And in other climate-affecting news, several members traveled across the country for a group month-long bicycle camping trip in California.

WE DO THINGS:

Various random events on the commune: A Women’s Sacred Singing Sauna in “The Skinner Box” (aka the sauna); Trout and Fox Acorn get married on Summer Solstice (after he proposed to her at the South Pole on Winter Solstice); Oakstock—our own mini-music festival at the Conference Site; a watermelon festival at the pond starting in late afternoon and ending with an Autumn Equinox ritual in the evening; an evening of Transparency Games (practicing deep communication skills); and an “Instrumental Concert by Instrumentalists of Various Skill Levels”. We had a record harvest of 6000 pounds (yes six thousand pounds) of sweet potatoes in October. Also, Twin Oaks is collaborating with a plant breeder from Cornell University in order to identify downy-mildew resistant cucumbers that can be used for future variety development.

WE DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY:

We’re experimenting with loosening our labour situation for the last part of the year—members will be able to work more in areas they want to do extra projects in, without being constrained by the regular annual labour budget. With such high population, we are labour-rich, and so have “extra” to spare. And our Ornamental Flowers business supplied our fresh-cut, naturally-grown flowers to it’s first lesbian wedding!

PEOPLE COME TO US:

We hosted our two large summer events for the public: The Communities Conference and the Women’s Gathering. Between the two events (held on separate weekends), about 200 people came to participate in workshops, networking and just enjoying themselves hanging out in the woods. We had an unusual visitor in our September Visitor Period: 20 years ago, two of our members left together to raise a family in Germany. This year, their 19-year old daughter came to the community as a Three Week Visitor! We also had a visit from an Acorn member who regaled us with stories about his visit to several income-sharing egalitarian communities in Europe—members had lots of questions about how they do things differently or similarly to us.

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Nashoba is one of our seven communal residences; it was originally built with the intention of housing primarily elder communards and people with limited mobility. This was generally the demographic utilizing the space, until recently. With two elder members passing away and several new members landing in Nashoba and not wanting to move out, folks under 65 now outnumber elders in the house (including me, who at age 30 is one of the younger members there).

There are several perks I see of living in Nashoba:
— It’s one of the cleaner small-living-groups at Twin Oaks, with a chore chart and kitchen cleaning schedule that members of all ages participate in with regularity
— It’s generally quiet and has thick, insulated walls
— It’s climate-controlled better than most other houses, especially in the summer when the living room is one of only a few air-conditioned public spaces on the farm
— The rooms and hallways are large, which is great for mobility or when folks just have a lot of stuff
— It’s attached to Appletree, the new addition to the building, which means having a second kitchen and set of accessible restrooms close by — a real benefit when 10 people are sharing a house!

As a new member landing in Nashoba, one thing that I thought would be a downside to living there is the lack of socialization with peers my same age. However, I quickly learned that I personally like it when the party is at someone else’s house and I can come home to my nice, clean, quiet space. I was also worried that my presence would be invasive or that I wouldn’t be welcome since I’m not the target demographic of the house. However, existing residents of Nashoba welcomed me with open arms and immediately invited us to be a part of group activities—there are regular movie nights, card games, and Steve’s famous pancake breakfast on Sundays! Jayel, one of the elder residents of Nashoba says, “Inter-generational living here is great! Most of my care team has been young people... I think we do a good job here at Twin Oaks.”

Living at Nashoba and interacting with elders at Twin Oaks has inspired me to join the newly formed Elder Team, which is designed to ensure that elder communards are getting the care and support they need. While care teams are responsible for organizing and administering care for the individual whose team they are on, the Elder Team is responsible for addressing issues and concerns that effect all elders, or when an issue pertaining to one elder may set a precedent for others. My hope is that working with elders on issues regarding “aging in utopia” will help Twin Oaks become an even better place to live and grow old in community.
Gender Culture at Twin Oaks: Selected Examples

by Valerie

A longer version of this article appeared in the Spring 2014 (#162) issue of Communities Magazine, featuring various aspects of how gender intersects with our alternative culture. See “Gender-Bending on the Commune” at ic.org/community-bookstore/product/162-spring-2014-gender-issues/

• Our Gender-Neutral Pronoun “Co”: This is used when the gender of a person is irrelevant or unknown, as in, “Each week, every member should turn in co’s labour sheet.” It’s much less unwieldy than her/his. Also handy for thickening the plot in conversations like, “I hung out with a special someone last night, and co wants to spend more time together.” (could be anyone....) The grammarians among us get antsy when people say “Each co should.....” (using a pronoun as a noun) and often a lively grammar-geek conversation ensues.

• “Addressing the Dress”: During our Saturday tours of the community, sometimes male tour guides are wearing a dress or skirt. For us this is normal, but for many of people, it is not. If a Twin Oaks man is giving the tour and is thusly attired, he must “address the dress”, and explain to the group that our culture does not limit this style choice to female-bodied members, and that we’d prefer all members be able to be comfortably attired instead of having to adhere to an arbitrarily-imposed fashion norm.

• Our Shirtless-ness Norms: On hot summer days, some people would like to take off their shirt to be cooler. In the mainstream, it is socially acceptable for men to do this but not women. We would prefer not to incorporate this gender bias and male privilege into our lives, and so our Nudity Policy states that at the times and places where it is acceptable for members to be shirtless, this applies to women and men equally.

• The Collective Menstrual Calendar: In the bathroom of our dining hall, each year a member creates a beautifully artistic menstrual calendar. It has a square for each day of the year, and every menstruating woman can write her name on each day that her cycle starts. In the mainstream, this information would not be considered suitable for public sharing. For us, it is a convenient way for women to track their cycle, and a fun art installation, without any stigma.

• Home-made Edits of Kids’ Books: This is a familiar scenario to radical caregivers everywhere—you’re reading a book to a child, and as the story unfolds, you realize the gender biases that are woven into the plotline, and find yourself starting to change pronouns... Some Twin Oakers wanted to take a more direct approach, and wielding a bottle of correction fluid and a pen, they went through our childrens’ books, and altered the gender of some of the characters (eg. who was the farmer or the nurse), changed “Mrs” and “Mr” to “Friend” (we do not use honorifics here) and generally enjoyed re-imagining the storylines created by various authors.