

The Other American Dream

Twin Oaks was different from other communes -- it flourished. And now, members can tote up the losses along the way

By Tamara Jones

Washington Post, Sunday, November 15, 1998; Page W12

To get there, follow the winding road past shadowed woods and sunlit fields, past the tiny church with its tall steeple, past the eerie old mill and listless river, until finally you come upon the sign that taunts: "If you lived at Twin Oaks, you'd be home now." Venture through the gate, down the dirt driveway to the white clapboard farmhouse, which is precisely where the path ends and the journey began.

Kat Kinkade remembers being so excited that first day that she couldn't decide where to start, so she grabbed an old broom and began sweeping the chicken house, making a compost pile of the filth. At 36, she was a bored secretary banking not just her future but her entire identity on a slim novel she had read in night school. Seven other people, including Kat's new husband and her teenage daughter, moved with her that day to rural Louisa County, Virginia, where they had leased a modest farm. The year was 1967, and as Vietnam exploded and racial violence bloodied streets across America, this small, misbegotten group of dropouts, visionaries, drifters and seekers began working on an exquisitely detailed plan to change the world.

Twin Oaks was one of thousands of communes to sprout across a restive America in the '60s and '70s, emblems of hope and hubris. Most would disappear unnoticed. Twin Oaks was different,

though. Against all odds, it managed to flourish, growing from eight people to nearly 100, becoming not merely self-sustaining but successful, a land trust sprawling across 450 efficiently managed acres to form what is surely one of the last bastions of pure communism in the modern world. From each according to ability, to each according to need. No one goes hungry or cold. Everyone is employed. The children are joyful. Competition, materialism and wastefulness are rare. Violence is forbidden; ambition quelled. Admirable goals have been achieved, and it would be easy to assume that happiness prevails. But reality is always more complex.

Which is why Twin Oaks, in its plump and improbable middle age, now finds itself searching so fervently for all the dreams that got lost, somehow, on the way to Utopia.

Kat is seething. A new family has moved to Twin Oaks, and an exception was made to let them join in the first place, since their three little boys upset the commune's stipulated child-adult ratio of 1:5. The family had assured the membership committee that they could manage with just three bedrooms. Somehow, a fourth room got tagged on, though, and now there is a petition to give the newcomers a fifth bedroom. "On an emotional level, I object to a small child having his own room," Kat bristles, adding, "I have lived in cramped quarters for years. I rather like them." Someone is trying to pull a fast one, she suspects. Her aquamarine eyes flash at the betrayal. But she won't be going to battle over this one. Kat has been the target of such resentment too many times herself -- still is sometimes, even now, at 67. She is weary. She has spent her lifetime longing for approval.

The bedroom debate is the best controversy brewing at Twin Oaks for the moment, though it is nowhere near as contentious as the video debate, or as whiny as the perennial tofu crisis. And nothing, of course, can compare to the 18-year debate over whether to dig a swimming hole.

The commune Kat helped start that June afternoon 31 years ago is what some members describe as a hypervillage today, with an annual income of more than \$500,000, mostly from the sale of high-quality rope hammocks that will end up in the back yards of the Range Rover yuppies Twin

Oaks holds in polite contempt. The original farmhouse now serves as a front office, and seven other residences are tucked in the woods like a rustic fraternity row. Bathrooms are public and unisex. A dairy barn looks out over subsistence crops that include asparagus, potatoes, corn and concord grapes. Steam tables in the central dining hall accommodate both vegans and meat-eaters with bountiful lunches and dinners that run the gamut from ratatouille and tarragon chicken to sinfully chocolate cake and trays of roasted chestnuts. The 17 communal cars and vans are christened with names like Swamp Thing, and rusty bicycles are lined up in racks across the property for communal use. There is a waiting list for dogs and cats. The antidepressant Saint Johnswort grows in the herb garden.

The original blueprint for Twin Oaks came straight from the pages of Harvard psychologist B.F. Skinner's utopian fantasy, *Walden Two*, which imagines a bloodless, self-contained society of 1,000 people solving life's daily problems through behavioral engineering. Children are conditioned to overcome temptation by wearing lollipops dipped in powdered sugar around their necks; if there is evidence they have licked the candy before permission is given, they are denied the treat. More dry, windy conversation than page-turning plot, the 1948 novel was nonetheless described as "sinister" and "dangerous" by the philosophy professor who put it on the reading list when Kat Kinkade took his evening extension course.

"I read *Walden Two* throughout one day, breaking only to get up and pace the floor and shout, 'This is what I want!' " she recalls now. Kat promptly wrote to the famous author, begging to know whether there was a real *Walden Two* to join. She received no reply. Then a friend pointed out a small classified ad in *Saturday Review*: A Washington, D.C., cabdriver named Wayne was interested in launching a *Walden Two* community and was seeking like-minded pioneers. Kat immediately responded, and soon moved to the District with her daughter to join Wayne's group house. It wasn't what Kat had envisioned. Wayne began pressuring her to "put my body up for communal use," arguing that it was no different than sharing income and possessions. "It is typical of me that I thought about the argument for a long time before I eventually concluded that there was somehow a difference," Kat notes wryly, "and it was typical of Wayne that sex was the only thing he wanted to share." She ended up marrying another boarder in the group house, and they eventually found a fellow *Walden Two* enthusiast who provided seed money to lease a small tobacco farm about 35 miles southeast of Charlottesville.

A few days after the eight founders settled in, the well at Twin Oaks ran dry, and Kat for the first time felt pangs of fear about this grand experiment. She learned that "wells recover by themselves, but we had to change our habits. Bathing in the river was not a huge sacrifice." Her panic had barely subsided when exasperation took its place. In an egalitarian gesture of nonsexism, one of the men volunteered to make dinner, but his perfectionist fussing over the consistency of the tomato sauce meant three separate trips to town for ingredients. Unlike many of the other members, most of them middle-class refugees, Kat had grown up in poverty and had a more realistic grasp of economics. She soon assumed management of the commune's finances.

Those early years were full of hardship and dissension, as well as triumphs and joy. That first winter, two cows starved to death in their frozen pasture because their naïve new owners assumed they could forage. Freeloading hippies began to turn up. Personality clashes made living cooperatively a constant challenge; one wife rejected the principle of simple living from the outset by moving her matching bedroom suite into the space she and her husband shared in the barn's hayloft. People squabbled about the *Walden Two* system of self-governance, which imagined decisions placed in the hands of a few competent planners. Though the neighbors and townsfolk would always perceive Twin Oaks as "that hippie farm," the commune in truth was somewhat out of step with its radical generation. As the anti-establishment movement flourished on the outside, one faction at Twin Oaks demanded that the community become more politically active; another rebelled against the ideological pressure by having nightly readings of *Winnie-the-Pooh*. The hammock shop set up on the front porch failed to earn enough to support them all, and most members were forced to get real jobs. Kat found herself back in an office. Her daughter, Josie, not

quite 15, ran off to California with the tomato-sauce artiste. Her husband, she says, "just left. I don't know where he went."

Still, more people kept arriving, bringing with them new skills and infusions of energy. But fewer and fewer of them had faith in the Walden Two model, and there was growing sentiment that a handful of people -- Kat in particular -- exerted too much authority. Eventually, outside facilitators were hired to mediate the inevitable power struggle, and the hierarchy was replaced by a more democratic government, with rotating planners and managers who are guided by the opinions and desires of the general population. Everyone has a voice and a vote. Twin Oaks stopped calling itself a Walden Two community seven years after it began. Kat was disappointed, but there were even more painful lessons yet ahead.

She chafes, even now, under the bureaucracy she herself helped create, the heavy machinery that keeps this customized mini-society running. Under the Twin Oaks labor system, Kat still must work 30 hours a week to earn her keep, compared with the 45.5 hours required of adults under 50. Kat chooses clerical tasks, mostly, and disregards the mandate that all members take a turn in the kitchen once a week. She is too frail, she says, to lug the heavy trays of dishes or stand on her feet for so long. "What are they going to do?" she asks in mock dismay. "Throw me out?"

Her bedroom is a cozy refuge in a building constructed with aging members in mind -- a single-story residence called Neshoba, with doorways wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs, and bathrooms equipped with elegantly handcrafted grab-bars from the commune's woodworking shop. The shelves in Kat's room are lined with books, music and her vast collection of decorative eggs, with marble shells cool and unbreakable. A small keyboard stands propped against one wall, so Kat can compose her cantatas, and a microwave that caused too much trouble a few years back is stashed beneath her bed. Her beloved black cat, Pharaoh, slinks in and out through a flap cut in the window, and guests are invited to sit in a recliner so ancient and loose-jointed that it threatens to topple over backward at the slightest touch. Kat tools around the commune's hilly terrain in an electric golf cart, and even though it is a luxury afforded any elderly or impaired member, it remains the source of whispered scorn. Kat doesn't dwell on this, and wishes that she could instead have a car of her own, which is strictly forbidden. A Camry, that's what she would have.

Evening is falling, and Kat leans back against the pillows on her quilted bed, remembering. Through the woods, an otherworldly sound can be heard, a distant keening that Kat recognizes as the baying of hounds from a neighboring farm. The sights, the sounds, the smells of this place are ingrained in her, as much a part of her being as her unnervingly direct gaze and sly sense of humor. She left Twin Oaks once, "with a man, but he wasn't mine," and she started a new commune that also frustrated and disappointed her. She ventured into the outside world for a while, then surprised herself by coming back. Of the original founders, she is the only one left here. Not long ago, another one attempted to return, but he had high cholesterol and smoked. He refused to alter his diet or give up cigarettes, so the membership committee rejected him.

His heart was just too weak, they decided, and his will too strong.

The hopefuls are trickling into the guest cottage called Aurora. Anyone seeking to join Twin Oaks must first live here for three weeks as a visitor, a test run for both sides. If they decide to apply, they must submit to an exhaustive interview session followed by a membership vote. After years of being at peak capacity, Twin Oaks is now trying to recover from an exodus that left a dozen vacancies, many of them from longtime members. The current population hovers near 100. In the commune's fledgling years, the average member was 23 years old with two years of college, and left in less than a year. Now the average Twin Oaker is 42, has a college degree and stays for eight years. The commune is overwhelmingly white, with roughly the same number of men and women. Some 600 people have joined Twin Oaks since its inception, yet there are no second-generation members. As one recruiter puts it, "Communards do not breed communards."

There are half a dozen prospects in this latest batch. There is breezy Theresa, who works with disabled kids back home in Buffalo and jokes about the "web of lies" she told her family about where she would be these three weeks. More subdued is Marci from Salt Lake City, who is unhappy with her life right now but doesn't know if this is going to be the answer. Jenna, who works at a nursing school, bustles in from Cleveland carrying an electric fan and hangers full of crisply pressed clothes. Antonina, a librarian from Annandale with dark red hair trailing to her waist, is worrying about the two cats she left in the care of her elderly father. A couple of Canadian lesbians arrive late after getting lost for hours in West Virginia.

At dinner, two handlers named Paxus and Melissa (no one at Twin Oaks uses surnames) gather the visitors around a picnic table for orientation. Melissa briskly reads from a fat red binder, outlining some of the commune's "norms" and customs. Wait until 7 p.m. to take seconds at dinner. Wash your hands before going to the steam tables. Don't hang out with Twin Oaks kids unsupervised, "because we don't know you." Don't take a communal bike to ride downhill if you didn't bring one uphill.

Jenna keeps interrupting to exclaim that she's "just fascinated" by everything.

The visitors are asked to introduce themselves and explain what brought them to this place. Antonina talks about road rage on the Beltway and how "there is a lot of violence masked as ambition in the world." Theresa is "tired of being part of the problem instead of the solution." Marci doesn't say much at all, except that she is searching. Jenna is yearning for "good, healthy, close relationships" to relieve her sense of isolation.

A ripple of anxiety surfaces with the disclosure that there is no communal coffee. There used to be, but the commercial coffeemaker was repossessed when hammock sales dropped and Twin Oaks could no longer afford the supplier's gourmet beans.

"You don't have coffee here?" This revelation rattles Theresa far more than the one yet to come about not expecting privacy while using the bathroom.

"So you guys don't make coffee?" Antonina presses. She has been working two part-time jobs lately, as a bibliographer at the library and then as a night delivery person for Takeout Taxi, trying to pay off medical bills from an uninsured hospital stay. It would be virtually impossible to do that if limited to the commune's \$2-a-day cash allowance should she move here. Antonina doesn't burden anyone with this explanation for now. The handlers tell them that extras, such as coffee and chocolate, can be purchased with personal funds; a designated errand runner makes twice daily trips into town.

They move on. Nudity is okay at the swimming pond, in the residences and anywhere after 9 p.m., but not within view of the neighbors or passersby. Twin Oaks discourages the use of negative words, which is why there are "norms" instead of rules, and why "bad" has been banned in favor of "not okay." It is "not okay" to criticize or gossip. There are free movies three nights a week in the big-screen video room, and tapes of TV programs, too, with "Ally McBeal" in great demand. There is also an ever-changing roster of groups gathering to dance, meditate, juggle, discuss literature, stage corny musicals, play serious Scrabble, watch meteor showers, analyze relationships or do whatever else catches their fancy. There was even a group that repaired to the root cellar to scream on a regular basis, but that disbanded years ago.

Paxus takes over. They shouldn't try to absorb too much too soon, he counsels. "You have just changed region, culture and climate, and there is reasonable expectation that you'll get unhealthy." The commune's health team can dispense over-the-counter medications, toiletries, first aid and homeopathic remedies. Jenna wants to know if she can get some Chap Stick. Paxus isn't sure. Probably.

He notes that sex is discouraged between members and visitors because of the power imbalance, and because joining a lover should not be the main reason to then apply for membership. "We're also aware that we don't control this, so we want to encourage you to have safe sex," he adds. Birth control is free for all members, and the commune also pays for voluntary sterilization and abortions.

On and on it goes, and after Paxus has finally finished and once again welcomed them, Theresa smiles wickedly and waits just the right beat.

"Wait till you find out that I'm an ax murderer," she says sweetly.

"We have a program for that," Paxus replies.

Keenan Dakota, former Keebler elf, business major, Sears junior manager and son of a CIA agent, wakes up early most mornings courtesy of his 2-year-old son, Rowan. They have a ritual when the weather is warm and the earth still generous, walking down to the commune gardens, where father and son forage for breakfast. They fill their mouths with golden raspberries and Asian pears that drip juice down the toddler's chin. Keenan is 39, and has lived here for 16 years now. He revels in his fatherhood, and his weekly work schedule typically includes hours of child care -- skinny-dipping in the pond with Rowan and his 5-year-old brother, Arlo, reading storybooks, going to the dairy to visit a new calf. Keenan and Kristen got married last April in the little white church down the road. They baked their own wedding cake and invited a few close friends for a pizzeria reception. As is the case with most private parties at Twin Oaks, uninvited guests showed up and were graciously accommodated. The same thing happened while Kristen was giving birth at home.

Keenan fell in love with Kristen when she was pregnant with Arlo and married to Ted. They were all friends. Kristen is a wholesome Minnesota farm girl, with long auburn hair that swings across her back in a thick braid, and a smattering of freckles across her fair skin. When she mentioned wanting to get some exercise during her pregnancy, Keenan offered to forgo his morning jogs and take her for walks, instead. "That was a big mistake on Ted's part," Keenan now allows. Keenan and Kristen grew close over long conversations as they strolled the forest paths. Kristen and Ted tried to make their marriage work for a while after the baby was born, but ended up divorcing. There was some anger and hurt, of course, but the three adults all remained at Twin Oaks and have blended their lives so seamlessly around the children they love that when Keenan starts researching plans to launch his own utopian community in Ecuador, it is a given that Ted will be a part of it. Words like "custody" and "visitation" are alien to Arlo. Kristen thinks that money -- or, more specifically, the lack of it -- is what makes her patchwork family work.

"Kids here have parents who are not financially stressed," she says. "That's an enormous relief. When I think of my parents, their biggest worry was money. That's what they fought about." Kristen has lived here for nearly eight of her 34 years, and when she and Keenan use their two weeks' vacation to visit her folks in Kansas or his in Herndon, they overdose on the pleasures they have consciously sacrificed to live what they consider a better and more responsible life: "We sit around on the couch and watch TV and eat junk food." Communards privately speculate that some semi-reclusive members, though, have not been off the farm in years.

This fall, some Twin Oaks kids have signed up to play in a local soccer league. Arlo dons his little shinguards and clambers into the van to go to practice. Just the thought of this makes Kristen roll her eyes and shake her head in disbelief: "I'm a soccer mom!"

Parenthood has always been a delicate negotiation at Twin Oaks, and some families complain that their young children are at best merely tolerated rather than nurtured by the community as a whole. Under the Walden Two plan, children were supposed to be communally raised, and a building was erected solely for that purpose. There was even a brief experiment with Skinner's

"air cribs," which resembled infant terrariums with their glass display windows that could be raised and lowered for access to the child. Round-the-clock nannies trained in behavioral engineering were supposed to be charged with their upbringing. Twin Oaks would have its own school, because, as Kat told a reporter rather airily in an early television documentary, "we want to make sure our children aren't messed up."

When Kat's daughter, Josie, gave birth, the baby was sent to the nursery to live and placed in the air crib. Josie, who was barely 20 at the time, would later say she had the baby "for the community." When the baby was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, devoted caretakers provided hours of physical therapy each day, and when Josie decided to follow a lover to Ohio, she left her daughter behind for a year. Kat now says her greatest regret is not having been more maternal toward Josie. Josie denies that this was true, yet echoes the same lament about her own daughter.

But from a child's-eye view, Twin Oaks is perhaps utopia -- an eternal summer camp without many of the fears and pressures of the outside world. That's how Devon, who is 16, sees the lifetime she has spent at Twin Oaks. No other children, and few adults, have lived here longer. She dropped out of public high school in her freshman year, dabbled in classes at a community college, and is focusing full time now on her fledgling musical career as a "rocky punky folky" singer and guitarist. She spent the summer traveling alone around Canada, performing at festivals and on street corners. The day she was packing to leave, her parents hovered over her anxiously, "all three of them." There is Gordon, her father, and Ira, his longtime girlfriend, and Logan, her mother. Logan also has a girlfriend. Devon is coltish and small, with her half-platinum, half-brown hair twisted into Pippi Longstocking pigtails; she looks much younger than she is. Her philosophy of life has nothing to do with model societies or utopian proposals. "Silliness is what keeps it going," she asserts.

Other musicians at Twin Oaks coach and encourage Devon, and even line up gigs for her at coffeehouses in Charlottesville. She can't see herself just weaving hammocks or working in Twin Oaks' small tofu-making business, and she has no plans to formally join the commune when she turns 18. But she is certain that she will return someday "when I'm done with my music career." Her reasons are simple and sound. "I feel safe here," she says. "If I have kids, I would want to raise them here."

Not long ago, Devon got into serious trouble after befriending a wild 18-year-old newcomer who kept a pet rat and Christmas tinsel in her towering hairdo. They went to visit a nearby sister commune, Acorn, and then it got late and everyone was asleep, so they borrowed an Acorn van to drive home, even though no one had a license. Devon ended up wrecking it on a dark, gravel road. The whole sorry chapter embarrasses and shames Devon now. She had to pay \$500 in damages to Acorn, "but I didn't mind the money. It was the trust I lost." She was surprised by how many adults at Twin Oaks told her they felt let down that she hadn't called them, even in the middle of the night, because they would have come for her. But the same intimacy that so touches her can also smother. "So many people knew me when I was 12, but I'm not 12 anymore," Devon complains. "I like so many people acting like my parents, but it can also be [expletive] annoying."

Twin Oaks' attempts to duplicate the Walden Two child-care scheme failed miserably as the more committed and experienced caretakers left the commune and individual parents sought more control over their own offspring. Parents now raise their own children, respecting the general values and norms of the community. There is an official policy specifying when and how squirt guns can be used, and a philosophy of nonviolence that makes spanking taboo. Twin Oaks runs an innovative computer reading program in the local schools, and also invites outside kids to attend its summer camp. But the original children's building at Twin Oaks is now little more than a glorified storage shed, and the private commune school has closed its doors. Despite the sea change, the most important decision of all is still not a parent's alone to make: Any member wishing to conceive or adopt a child must first apply for permission.

Rowan was an accident, and Kristen could feel the community's disapproval and even hostility. When she was seven months along, she was evicted from her comfortable room in an adults-only residence and forced to move to less desirable quarters. On the bulletin boards in the dining hall where commune members post information and opinions on clipboards and 3x5 cards, someone declared that "pregnancy in this day and age is obscene." Kristen was devastated. It was signed by a friend. He insisted he hadn't meant her; two other women had announced "accidental" pregnancies in quick succession after Kristen. Kristen sought out her critics and cleared the air.

Once the baby arrived, the mood shifted dramatically. More-experienced mothers coached Kristen in nursing, and she never had to cook or wash dirty diapers. Under the commune's labor system, she was "paid" just to be with her newborn. When she was ready to do other work as well, there were plenty of jobs on the farm that accommodated an infant in tow. The fact that members make their own schedules meant she could -- and still does -- easily adjust hers to fit the children's.

Keenan finds it maddening that "people with families and careers are systemically discriminated against" when new members are chosen. Outside work is generally forbidden, except under special circumstances, such as when a member is earning vacation money. Families are discouraged by the lack of structured day-care or educational programs, as well as the quota limiting the number of children in the community to around 15. And while the environmental and pacifist ideals of Twin Oaks at times attract deeply passionate and committed people, recruiters like Keenan find that most who express interest fall into a far different category.

"This is not a standard lifestyle choice," Keenan allows. "The sort of people who tend to move here move a lot. They've not made deep emotional connections because of that . . . Someone said the visitors' program selects between loners, losers and drifters." Sooner or later, he is confident, the true loners feel crowded, the losers feel overworked and the drifters drift away. At the same time, the core of competent and capable members continues to erode. Leaving seems contagious, and the departures happen in waves. The reasons vary -- broken romances, families wanting a place of their own, disenchantment with the inevitable discovery that a commune is not one big, happy family holding hands and singing "Kumbaya" around a bonfire in the woods.

On a recent afternoon when two longtime members and their baby are leaving for a smaller consciousness-raising commune in Oregon, only a handful of Twin Oakers come by to see them off. The hugs are long and teary, and Keenan kneels on the ground to tie his departing friend's shoe, tenderly chiding her: "Who dresses you?" As the commune's red station wagon heads for the airport with their scant belongings in the back, someone else laughs sadly. "Let's go see if they left anything good in the refrigerator."

In the residence called Tupelo, a new family is moving in.

At the age of 36, with two cars, a house in the Cleveland suburbs, a decent income and three young children, Dave and Beth Lloyd decided that they wanted to "live more lightly on the earth" and get off the consumer treadmill. So they quit working, sold virtually everything they owned, and blew their savings to spend a year camping across the country and then loafing all winter on a beach in Costa Rica. This is the grand finale of their midlife crisis.

"People couldn't believe it, man," Dave is recounting with a satisfied grin. "They were ready to have us locked up and put on Thorazine." Beth had been interested in communities for a long time, and Dave caved in after attending a conference on alternative lifestyles. "Let's do it," he announced. Beth was already home-schooling their three boys, ages 6, 9 and 13. Dave was losing interest in his nursing career. After visiting Twin Oaks twice, they applied for membership.

"It just occurred to me to give up all the hassles -- money, car insurance, bouncing checks, going to the bank, traffic tickets, late fees at the library." Dave is fixing a bedtime snack for his youngest

son, Maechyl, in the kitchen at Tupelo. Some other Tupelo residents wander in, and Maechyl excitedly wiggles his first loose tooth for them. His parents worry that Maechyl feels a little lost and clingy. On the other hand, Eecayo, their oldest boy, is blossoming. A curiously self-contained boy, Cayo loves to work, helping Dave make his famous homemade pizza on the dinner shift and happily washing and putting away hundreds of dishes when his mother pulls kitchen duty. When he was briefly enrolled in public school, Cayo was labeled autistic and learning-disabled, and funneled into special education, which seemed to exacerbate behavior problems. Here, he is admired for his sweetness and good manners, and his parents hope that Cayo will learn carpentry and other vocational skills from patient teachers.

The middle Lloyd boy, 9-year-old Cameron, faced an identity crisis his very first day at Twin Oaks. The dairy manager was already called Cameron. Twin Oaks can only have one of everybody; Cameron Lloyd would have to change his name. He rechristened himself Calvin, but his parents still aren't used to it. Cameron is sharing a room with Cayo, even though there is an empty one in the wing where the Lloyds live. The three-member planning committee declined to give it to the Lloyds, wary of one family taking up so much space. A petition went up appealing the denial of the fifth bedroom, and the Lloyds have 10 days to muster 51 percent of the eligible voters to sign. The Lloyds themselves are not openly pushing for it ("This is ridiculous," Dave privately says). It is Keenan and Kristen who are spearheading this campaign, fueled by the conviction that, once again, families are getting short shrift.

Keenan and Dave go running together each morning, and Keenan was instrumental in recruiting the Lloyds to join Twin Oaks. He was careful not to paint a perfect picture. Speaking from painful experience and long observation, the Dakotas warned the Lloyds that couples who come to Twin Oaks together rarely stay together. Beth and Dave are confident, though. They met at a Grateful Dead concert and have been married for 10 years. It is her second time. They talked about trying to keep their family unit intact without being consumed by the larger community. But the borders of privacy and intimacy shift and blur in a subculture that shuns possessiveness. One afternoon, while Dave is in the kitchen cooking, a young woman in a halter top comes up behind him and hugs him tight around the middle. Dave chooses to treat the embrace as a joke, and responds with the same goofy bear roar he makes when playing with his boys. The woman laughs and backs off.

Each adult at Twin Oaks gets a private bedroom. Beth's has intricately carved furniture. She paints her walls a shade of green that her visiting mother later pronounces ghastly. Beth thinks it feels like a treehouse, her own leafy hideaway. "I can have my own room, be my own person again," she says. Dave can't wait to fix up his adjacent room just the way he wants, too.

A few weeks after settling in, the Lloyds are relaxing after dinner one evening on the scratchy sofas in one of Tupelo's living rooms. Beth is saying how she hopes this new life will be forever, that her children will grow up inspired "to do good stuff in the world, go build more communities." She feels confident that they have made the right choice.

"Oh, yeah. I know that leaving the lifestyle I was in was something I needed to do," she says. "I'm still not exactly sure what I want in community. At times, when I'm having a really bad day and my kids are scattered around, I feel empty-nest syndrome."

Cameron says he is getting used to being Calvin. "Calvin is more up and about than Cameron and likes doing more weird stuff than Cameron," he declares, "because Cameron lived on a street in the middle of nowhere. Now I'm in the middle of somewhere."

When his mother is asked if there's anything she misses about Cleveland or the life she has forsaken, nothing immediately springs to her mind, and it is Cameron who answers for her.

"Your home?" he pipes up softly.

People come here with secrets. Kat remembers Delancey as a sensuous and beautiful creature, desired by the men and envied by the women. Keenan saw something more desperate. "She wore a lot of peekaboo-type clothes," he remembers. Because they belonged to the same self-awareness group, he had heard Delancey tell of terrible sexual abuse suffered during her childhood.

Delancey had disclosed her past during the lengthy membership interview, but Keenan thinks she may have hidden the darkest details. People are either accepted at their word or not here. Delancey was.

Sometimes sadness seemed to creep over Delancey like a fog, and she would disappear, burrowing in bed for days. The commune's health team assigned her a care group. They brought her meals, woke her up for work and made sure she got to her appointments with an outside therapist. They also spent countless wrenching hours talking to her, listening to her. For a while, the fog would lift, only to descend again. Delancey spoke obsessively about death.

Fearing that Delancey was a danger to herself, the care group scouted out private psychiatric hospitals and selected one that didn't feel like an institution or prison. Twin Oaks would pay for her treatment. Sending her home to her family "was not an option," Keenan recalls. They were her family now. When Delancey returned to Twin Oaks, she seemed much better.

One time after Delancey had refused to emerge from her bedroom for two weeks, and the care group had put her on 24-hour suicide watch, they found her frantically stuffing clothes into a bag. She was going to Boston to visit a friend. Her caretakers were alarmed. Delancey had always promised them she wouldn't kill herself on Twin Oaks property. Stay here, they implored. No, she insisted, this will cheer me up. Let one of us go with you, they begged. Delancey refused. She would be fine, they should stop worrying. Five people went with her to the train station, stopping along the way to dally over lunch, and then ice cream cones, until finally they ran out of delaying tactics. At the ticket window, Keenan slipped into line behind her. He followed Delancey onto the train.

What are you doing?

I'm going with you.

Back and forth they argued, until Delancey hopped off the train. Keenan followed. Delancey quickly jumped back on. Keenan scrambled aboard again. The conductor told them to make up their minds. Delancey stepped off. Keenan did, too. She pretended to walk away, then suddenly wheeled and bolted again for the train, Keenan in pursuit. They got on; she got off. This time Keenan waited until the train was starting to move and he was certain he had won. Delancey was safe. They all went home.

Ashamed of her illness, Delancey kept trying to conceal it from the commune as a whole. She seldom claimed sick leave, instead struggling to fulfill her weekly labor quota. She rarely managed, Keenan recalls, and the hours she owed kept amassing. Those who didn't know she was ill saw her as unreliable, and the impression she left was of hammocks half-woven and kitchen shifts left short-handed. In commune parlance, she fell into "the labor hole," and was placed on probation. When she was unable to exert the effort needed to make up all the lost hours, the system did what it was designed to do, and Delancey was expelled from Twin Oaks. The decision was immediately appealed, and a petition to reinstate her went up on the bulletin board. When the 10-day deadline was up, the signatures were counted. She was one short.

They found her body that day in a commune truck filled with carbon monoxide from the running engine. She had driven it to a distant edge of the property across the road from the main

compound. Her friends believe she was trying to keep her promise.

Five years have passed, but the community never really recovered from Delancey's death, both Kat and Keenan agree. There had been other deaths, even suicides, at Twin Oaks, but this was different. They had had a plan. It was supposed to save her. The strength of many was supposed to be enough to support the frailty of one.

People who hadn't realized how troubled Delancey was, who might have signed the petition if they had only known, blamed the care group for being too secretive. The caretakers were also chastised for not ensuring adequate backup in case of a crisis during their summer vacations. Others argued that Twin Oaks was not intended to be a therapeutic community and never should have accepted Delancey in the first place. The community provided outside counseling for anyone who wanted help coping with the tragedy. There was a bitter meeting over whether labor credits should be granted for time spent in grief therapy. Most of the care group, as well as several others, ended up leaving Twin Oaks for good. Commune policy was changed so expulsion is no longer automatic when someone falls too deeply into the hole.

Keenan still feels the melancholy beneath the carefree surface of Twin Oaks, even among those who never knew Delancey. It's not about her death, ultimately, but about a loss even more devastating.

"Some people think this place is supposed to be Utopia," says Keenan, "and if it's not here, then where else?"

Where do you begin to save the world when you can't salvage just one soul?

Why not here. There are people who are certain that Twin Oaks has come close, and could come closer still, if only it had the passion to match its principles, the focus to go with its vision. The notion of Utopia has seduced mankind since banishment from the Garden of Eden. The word itself comes from Sir Thomas More's Utopia, written in 1516. The Catholic martyr envisioned an island populated by a content and virtuous society. Everyone went to bed at 8 p.m. Education was free and continued throughout life. Adulterers were sent to prison for the first offense and put to death for a second. Utopia was happily self-contained.

Contentment is not what Paxus seeks, not from this commune, not for it. There is something more exciting, more fulfilling, beyond full bellies and agreeable work. Paxus, ne Earl Schuyler Flansburgh III, is the Ivy League offspring of a successful Boston architect and his wife, a general's daughter. He is a self-described revolutionary whose letter applying for membership to Twin Oaks contained this warning: If you like the way things are, then you might want me to stay away.

He was invited to join last spring. Since then, he has thrown himself into efforts to recruit younger members, secure the commune's economic base and prod its social conscience. He holds degrees from Cornell in industrial engineering and economics, and notes casually that his younger brother is a rock star. Pax himself resembles a counterculture teen idol, with his chiseled features and neo-hippie hair, though he is 41. Pax is an advocate of open relationships and an active member of the commune's polyamorous group. Philosophically, Kat herself admires the ideal of love without possessiveness or jealousy. Practically, she knows that it is an impossible feat for most humans. When a beautiful, earnest young friend named Alex starts falling for Pax, Kat cannot help herself. Don't, she cautions her. He will never be yours. Alex takes the chance, and even attends the polyamorous group's meetings in an effort to conquer her pangs of jealousy. When Pax and another lover ask Alex if they can borrow her bedroom for a nap one afternoon, Alex agrees, later telling girlfriends over herbal tea that she is proud to have reached "a more spacious place." But her heart is not really in this, she later confides, her customary guard down. "I'm not polyamorous," she says with a rueful laugh. "I'm polyconvenient. I want to be with Pax."

Pax's resume is an alternative adventure story: ocean engineer in Hawaii, smuggler of Tibetan monks across the Himalayas, software entrepreneur. He has hitchhiked across the Pacific on sailboats and run anti-nuclear campaigns for Friends of the Earth. To avoid deportation from the Czech Republic during an important anti-nuclear campaign, he married a Czech woman. She is described on his resume as a "political activist and retired bank robber," but they seldom see each other. He has an uncanny knack for being in the middle of political turmoil: Panama, Nicaragua, Eastern Europe. He refers to his own country as "the untied snakes" and also eschews capitalization of the pronoun "i." He can offer thesis-quality arguments for both practices.

"I'm convinced community is the answer," Pax is fond of saying, "I'm just not sure what the question is." He thinks of Utopia as "an illusory place." Pax is just back at Twin Oaks from an anti-nuclear action in Vermont, where he earned labor credits for getting himself arrested. He is now busy trying to drum up new hammock customers for Twin Oaks, which is facing a crisis because its biggest contract -- with Pier One Imports -- has been dramatically reduced. The commune's more ardent environmentalists secretly welcome this setback, since the plastic rope is non-biodegradable and the hammock stands are made from old-growth wood. Pax and two fellow commune business managers go to the casual furniture trade show in Chicago and line up promises of new orders. Twin Oaks must diversify, Pax is convinced. Banking on a single fat contract is too risky. It's time to change -- go on the Internet, put out a sexier catalogue, hire some sales reps.

And why settle for hammocks? Pax wonders. He peppers the current planners with proposals for change, solutions to problems. When a neighboring farm's baying dogs keep communards awake at night, Pax devises the perfect pacifist response: Twin Oaks will offer to build the neighbor a deluxe dog house on the other side of his property. Pax convinces the planners to earmark \$1,000 for this project. Everyone will be happy.

Except the neighbor says no.

Pax would also like to see Twin Oaks become more active politically. Although Twin Oaks subscribes to various magazines and newspapers, and has Internet access, current events often elude or bore members. When a visitor passed through two weeks after the Chernobyl disaster with dark warnings of nuclear winter, Keenan had to interrupt. "What's Chernobyl?" he asked. Pax himself considers the Clinton impeachment scandal ridiculous and still rails against the Reagan administration.

Pax does not expect his grand plans to make him popular, and he will evaluate his impact on Twin Oaks in six months or maybe nine, and move on if he hasn't influenced it in a positive way. He's not going to squander his passion.

"My political mentors said if you don't make any enemies, you're not doing anything important," he says.

"My mother says if you do what you love, you don't grow old."

The visitors are awakened at 1 in the morning. The dairy manager raps on their bedroom doors. "It's happening!" They hurry to the barn, and watch in wonder as a cow gives birth.

"It was extraordinary," Antonina recalls. "We all had our flashlights trained on the birth sac, and there was this luminescent glow. You could see her dainty little hooves inside." They all grabbed towels and helped dry off the shivering calf, rubbing her down for an hour. Antonina was the first to feed her. She finally got back to bed at 3, then awoke stiff and sore, as if she had slept in a freezer. She reported for morning kitchen duty, but by her afternoon shift at food processing, she could feel her eyelids growing heavier. "You're really tired," the supervisor told her. "You should

just go sleep." It still amazes Antonina that this was an option.

Adjusting to life on a commune has ups and downs so predictable that they are listed in a visitors' guidebook called "Not Utopia Yet." Antonina runs the full gamut -- elation, confusion, disappointment, anticipation -- during her stay. She is 41 and has been thinking about coming to Twin Oaks for two years. She can't remember how she first heard of it, "maybe hanging out at Food for Thought in Dupont Circle." Antonina never got the art degree she intended, but went back to school and graduated in anthropology, settling later for jobs but no career. She is not ambitious or competitive by nature, and considers the commune a way to lead a life of integrity. By her second week, though, she has grown weepy, surprised by her own emotion. No one seems to notice her, no one is congratulating her for this noble choice she is about to make. She misses her cats.

"I want to feel close to something now!" she cries. "I want my cats now!" Her face is pink. She suffers from lupus and is supposed to stay out of the sun. If she joins Twin Oaks, her cats will have to go on the waiting list. She stops brushing her long hair, just to see what it's like not to.

In the pond one day, Antonina is floating naked. Suddenly she finds herself swimming laps back and forth. She stops, stunned. She has always eschewed exercise, hating the pressure to look a certain way, to fit a certain image. But here she feels no one judging her by her size. She swims some more, feeling her heart beat faster, stronger, her anger dissolving.

The day she leaves, Antonina is fearful about driving again after three carless weeks. She has had nightmares about getting killed on the Beltway. She finds herself wishing people would give her big hugs goodbye, but that doesn't happen. She longs for a sense of "community and connectiveness, and I have faith I'll find them here eventually." She made eye contact a few times here with Kat Kinkade, "and she gave me the most beautiful smile in return. She's someone who has done extraordinary things in her life. I respect her so much."

During the membership committee interview, someone cautioned Antonina:

"You realize it can be very stressful living here . . ."

She was quick to answer.

"Yeah, but believe me, it's very stressful out there, too."

Kat stopped caring, she says, a long time ago.

"I think I'm the only one left who remembers it was an experiment," she says now.

She considers it a failure.

"I don't think egalitarian communities are a good idea, and this one is too close to suit me," she declares. "There are people here for life who mean it." She is not one of them. What are her options? She is nearing 70, with no pension or savings, no Social Security, no health insurance. There is Josie, her daughter, who lives down the road from Twin Oaks in a trailer with her lover and several dogs. Josie is a doctor, and could take care of her mother, but neither of them is ready for that. Josie tells Kat she would be bored if she left Twin Oaks.

"I'm trapped," Kat says.

She has written two books about Twin Oaks, and her signature is on more policy in the commune's six-inch-thick binder than anyone else's. She agitated for new buildings, new members and satellite communities when the more popular sentiment was to maintain the status

quo, settle back, just enjoy the easy life. Kat has served two 18-month rotations on the planning committee, the commune's equivalent of a board of directors. When she was rejected for another turn, the wound was deep and personal. Those who come to Twin Oaks expecting to find in Kat a matriarch or symbol are disappointed. She scarcely involves herself in community life these days. She is more likely to fix her own meals or take something from the steam tables back to her room than linger in the dining hall. She devotes most of her energy, time and resources to a different endeavor now -- a form of harmony called shape-note singing. She belongs to the choir in the tiny church down the road, and raises her pure voice in song to a deity she does not believe in.

Kat spent a lonely childhood intensely believing and unbelieving in God, each conviction complete, never hovering on doubt. Her childhood was not a happy one, Kat recalls; she and her younger sister were sexually molested by their stepfather, and when Kat reported the abuse, the family disintegrated.

With Walden Two, Kat thought she had something to believe in again, belong to at last. But the undercurrent of sadness always courses through this community, she finds. "It's this disappointment of oh, life isn't what I thought it would be. Is a romance less than they hoped, is intimacy less than they assumed, is the community itself less united in its goals and desires?"

Imprisoned by her own idealism, Kat has no answers.

What she longed for most in her own life, she reveals, is a father. "A father who was strict and had firm rules and expected a certain behavior from me but loved me."

And yes, she is not a fool, of course that is the same expectation she had of this place, the same yearning she hoped to satisfy that day she grabbed a broom and began sweeping. She purses her lips tightly.

"It never did love me," she says of her own cherished Utopia. "It respected me and it feared me, but it never loved me."

The membership committee has accepted Antonina. The day they called her with the news, Antonina lopped nine inches off her hair and began looking for a new home for her cats; she hopes to pay off her bills and move in by spring. The petition for a fifth bedroom for the Lloyds failed by a few votes. Paxus is thinking about starting an anti-nuclear community of his own with a lover in Eastern Europe, while Keenan and Kristen are drafting plans to launch their ideal commune in Ecuador next year. There's an opening on Twin Oaks' planning committee, and everyone is stunned when Kat announces that she is thinking about applying. Privately, she says she always meant to try just one more time to make it work. The season is changing and the dining hall smells of cinnamon and apples baking in the oven. The honey gold light of autumn pours through the trees.

To get there, it is best to follow someone who knows the way. Keenan trudges up the hill behind the pond with Rowan riding on his shoulders and Arlo running barefoot ahead. They duck beneath the humming electric cow fence and cross a wide clearing, until they reach a heavy wooden gate, and behind it, at the very edge of Twin Oaks' property, the cemetery. Arlo scampers excitedly from marker to marker, asking Keenan: Who's this, who's here?

Her grave is sheltered by oak trees and birches. The headstone is the color of faded roses, with prancing wood sprites etched on either side. There is the name she gave herself -- Delancey Fionn Fields -- and beneath it, the name on her death certificate: Dawn Faith Spinney. Beneath the dates of her birth and death, June 16, 1968, and July 23, 1993, is the epitaph:

"She loved."

Who's this? Who's here?

No one you knew.

Keenan lingers, until the children grow restless. Hungry, they start the journey home.

Tamara Jones is a staff writer for the Magazine.

© Copyright 1998 The Washington Post Company