

Meadowdance

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bers of the glbtq community are the same things that were attractive to all of us who are here now: the ability to join in a celebratory, creative culture of people who get a kick out of pooling their efforts – where children are treated with respect and consideration, where ecologically sound living is central, where we can share talents and time with other people of like mind,” said Luc Reid, a founding member.

Kristy and Jaime, a lesbian couple then from Massachusetts, had decided to check it out and stayed at Meadowdance for three weeks last year before moving on. The couple was interested in coming to Vermont for a civil union, and had contact with Meadowdance before moving in. They found the people friendly and felt welcomed, but questioned some aspects of the community. The work requirement – then nearly 50 hours per week – was more than they had bargained for, Kristy said, and she and Jaime felt there was little time to attend lgbtq events or gatherings outside Meadowdance.

“We know we’re in a founding stage,” said member Amanda Walden. “We have a limited number of resources,” she said, indicating that as finances improve and the membership grows, the workload may be reduced.

Kristy and Jaime have other concerns that, while the ideal goal is for equality among all the members, a few individuals appear to hold more power. They were also surprised to learn that members, via e-mail, had considered using them as representation for the gay community without contacting them first. Kristy and Jaime said they are not endorsing the group, largely because of group dynamics rather than gender issues.

Community members agreed that it can be hard to join the group process. “Some people are more outspoken than others,” Amanda admitted.

Luc said he heard concerns about the power dynamic from another prospective member who also decided to leave. “People need to be vocal,” he said, acknowledging that people like himself who feel comfortable speaking up are more likely to have their concerns addressed.

A post-visit email exchange sought to clarify further why a gay man or lesbian would want to join a straight intentional community, no matter how well-intentioned that community is in seeking diversity, especially given what appears to be an isolationist tendency, living and working together, and not having independent access to transportation to glbtq support and events.

“I think that the impression that we’re isolationist may be a mistaken one,” Luc wrote. “We attend political and entertainment events (for example, most of our members attended the [January] peace march); some of our children go to the local public school and we attend school events; those of us who participate in an organized religion worship locally; we see friends and neighbors at stores and the co-op; we meet folks at the library; we have local friends over to visit; our children go back and forth to their friends’ houses; in the fall we’ll be opening a school that will have room for a small number of local kids from outside the community; and so on. Really our level of isolation isn’t particularly different from that of a family with a home business.”

About independent access to transportation, he explained, “Members are welcome to keep private vehicles, and members who don’t do so have vir-

tually unrestricted access to vehicles in community use. Not only are cars provided to independently travel to events they want to attend, but Meadowdance pays for fuel for local travel.”

Meadowdancer Sue Morris joined the discussion about why lgbtq people might want to become members of this community: “Living in a community based on how you choose to live your sexual life might not be as rewarding as choosing to live in a community that shares not only those values, but your other life values, your philosophy of living, of treading lightly on the earth, of communing with others to share work, play and vision. As an egalitarian, child-centered community that welcomes human diversity, ecological sensibility, mutual learning and joy, we welcome people who share our vision of cooperative living. How we live our sexual life is only one aspect of who we are.”

Luc continued, “There’s a sense here that children and adults deserve and get respect; that you can trust people to take care of things and to take your feelings into account; that you’ll be supported in your decisions; that we’re doing our best to steward the environment; and so on. People also come here to live because they want to be part of a solution for problems like unchecked consumerism, environmental destruction, and lack of connection between individuals in the world.”

“It also might be attractive to live in a community of people who support your sexuality, rather than people who tolerate it or worse, nail ‘Take Back Vermont’ signs on their barns,” said Luc. “Certainly it’s been my impression that gays and lesbians who have been here have felt a level of comfort and freedom that they don’t generally find outside the GLBTQ community.”

Asked what having glbtq members does for them as a community, Luc responded, “We don’t value a woman in our community because she’s a lesbian, or because she isn’t – and all else being equal, we’d prefer that there were both lesbians and straight women (and gay men and straight men and bi men and women and transgendered men and women), because being with a variety of people on a day to day basis, from our point of view, enriches the experience of life.”

The skeptical journalist pushed a bit further, asking whether the community might have an economic agenda in recruiting lgbtq members who might have a decreased likelihood of having children.

“We value people over money in any case,” responded Luc, “although not having children does make it easier to get in if we’re in a financial or work crunch. For instance, at this point we can’t afford to take single parents of small children, even though we hope to be able to reverse that limitation quite soon. Also, I expect we would attract gay men and lesbians who disproportionately do have children, because of our focus on providing a supportive environment for children.”

Amanda and her partner Ken Walden are expecting their first baby in July. They seem eager to open the community to a more diverse group.

Asked whether the community would fund artificial insemination if a lesbian member wanted to bear a child after joining, Luc responded, “Interesting question! It hasn’t ever yet come up; we would have to discuss it as a group to come to a decision. I would suspect we’d be inclined to fund such a thing, but that’s just my personal sense.”

Pushed to answer related questions – would the community exercise veto power over that desire depending on community finances; would it exercise veto power over a single or married straight woman who wanted to bear a child and could become pregnant without medical intervention – the answers suggested that Luc (and by extension, Meadowdance) had not yet worked out the details of true equality where childbearing is concerned.

“We don’t consider it to be up to the community whether or not someone has a child. Of course it has an impact on the community, but as a group we only really have powers over the

between 1997 and 2000, we had one participant who was enthusiastic about the community in large part because of his interest in ecological sustainability. We have long had a core agreement about ‘equality among all people, regardless of race, color, gender, spirituality, sexual orientation, background and age...’ but I think he thought it was primarily lip service. When the subject came up in a political discussion and he realized that the rest of us were actively supportive of the glbtq community, he said of his family ‘Yes, we tolerate them – but of course we teach our children that it’s wrong.’ We told him he was in the wrong group. He left.”



Top, Meadowdancers gather for dinner in a common room at their temporary Goddard College home. Above, Meadowdancers Ken and Amanda Walden are looking for a few good glbtqs as diversity pioneers.

things that we’ve agreed to cover as a group, and having children is not one of those things.” That is, Luc later amended, “we as a community have decided not to make any Agreements about people having children, and therefore we don’t exercise any control over that kind of decision.”

“We have to get some pioneers here,” Ken said, “so members can feel akin to people of another group.”

Looking at their current level of diversity, members pointed out that, while Meadowdance is primarily Caucasian and heterosexual at present, some of the community’s children have a Hispanic father, and a few members speak Spanish.

“We hope to grow at a slow rate because of the intensive membership process,” said Amanda, the community’s “Member Caretaker.” She explained that when a new family moves in, it changes the dynamics of the community.

While the membership policy seems complicated, in reality it wasn’t that hard, Kristy said. Basically, prospective members must go through trial periods of living at Meadowdance, and they must adhere to community Agreements. To demonstrate the group’s commitment to human diversity, Luc Reid told the following story:

“When we were forming,

Money Matters – Or Not

The financial picture is also taken into consideration for potential membership. The community claims that it welcomes possible members who have no money to invest and will work to find ways to make that possible. On the other hand, members would have to consider the practicality of accepting as a member someone, for example, who has unusually high health care costs.

Asked whether members agree to invest all their existing assets, such as retirement accounts, investments, term insurance policies, stock dividends, property – or the value derived from its sale – cars, and so on, Luc Reid said no.

“We ask new members if they have money they want to loan to the community when they come in, but it’s strictly up to individual discretion whether they loan anything or not – if indeed they have anything to loan, which not everyone does,” Luc wrote in an email. “I think that as a rule we would tend to urge people not to liquidate retirement funds or other assets, because after all a person can’t be certain when coming to Meadowdance that they’ll stay forever. That’s certainly the general intention, but of course people change over time.”

Meadowdance is organized financially as a limited liability partner-

ship in which the community holds its land and businesses in common. Assets – including land, buildings, computers, and other resources held in common – would pay any debts, Luc said, and individuals would not be held liable. Individuals’ investments, however, could be lost, if the community were to dissolve, he said.

Interestingly, two types of membership are based on disability. A blocking member is permitted to block consensus, and a nonblocking member is not allowed to. The current definition of a nonblocking member is someone who is dependent on others for daily living due to a mental or emotional disability. Luc explained that the distinction is made so that “someone [who] can’t understand what’s going on, can’t over-rule.” He said in five years, no one has blocked consensus.

Luc said it’s “amazing” how close Meadowdance has come to achieving its ideals – except in their current living situation.

Visions and Permits

With three years of planning and a couple more years of shared living behind them, Meadowdance members are looking to the future.

The community owns 200 acres of fields, woodlands, streams and a pond in Marshfield, a house inhabited by tenants, and a barn. The pond was once used for an ice business, and until a storm in 1912 destroyed the trees, there was a maple sugaring business. The group would like to bring the maples back, Luc said.

Plans for the future that Meadowdance include building a cluster of homes and a community center on 20 acres, leaving the remaining 180 acres in a mostly natural state. Possibly cars won’t be allowed on the land any further than a roadside parking lot. As many as 75 people could live in the community.

Called a planned residential development, or PRD, the clustered housing is allowed within the conservation/forestry zone of the land. However, the local Development Review Board “appears to me to be much more cautious about permitting PRDs in conservation/forestry [zones] than in agriculture/residential,” Luc said. He thinks it could take six months to get town approval. Detailed plans or drawings were not made available to OITM.

There may be some reservations on the part of townspeople who aren’t familiar with intentional communities such as Meadowdance. Community members say they are eager to talk with neighbors to learn what their concerns may be. Sue said one issue that came up previously was possible light pollution from the future community buildings. That problem has been addressed in the plans, which are being revised, she said.

Summing up, Sue explained, “Egalitarianism isn’t just a cool word, it’s a philosophy that people are valuable no matter what their sexual orientation, no matter what their economic status, no matter what their level of education, no matter what their background, interests, race, or even taste for pickles is. It is a deep felt and daily philosophy here. This is a place where men can let out their gentle, nurturing side with support and females their strong, mathematical side. That is something that is not available in the common culture. Perhaps there are people who are interested in living in that kind of place.” ▼

Lynn McNicol has lived in an intentional community in the southern US and now lives in Burlington. Euan Bear briefly lived and worked with a lesbian collective in Hinesburg a quarter century ago.