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Ecovillage People

Thirty-six years ago, one woman dreamed of creating an independent society. Today, her dream is a thriving community that's creating its own feminist culture.

By Emily Rems

Most people have never chucked a trash can through the window of a Starbucks or done time for revolutionary antics aimed at the WTO, but who among us hasn't felt the urge to throw off the shackles of global corporate culture in favor of a simpler, more independent life? If you've ever longed to be free of sexism and materialism, to live off of home-grown and homemade food, or to work in a place where your tasks are meaningful and your financial needs are minimal, you may have dismissed such ideas as being no more than a pipe dream. But for the residents of Twin Oaks, a feminist ecovillage tucked away on 465 acres of farmland in central Virginia, these dreams are a tangible reality.

Established in 1967 on a former tobacco plantation 35 miles south of Charlottesville, Virginia, Twin Oaks is part of what is known as the "Intentional Communities" movement, Intentional Communities include everything from rural farming communes like Twin Oaks to those group-house hotbeds of punk rock ON activism that tend to crop up in more urban areas. And while they numbered in the thousands at the peak of their popularity during the heady '60s, you might be surprised to learn that there are over 600 such organizations still operating in North America alone.

Back in '67, the entire population of Twin Oaks numbered only eight people. They were all there because of *Walden Two*, a novel written by Harvard psychologist B.F. Skinner, which Kat Kinkade—a self-described "bored secretary"—had read in a night school class. The book inspired Kinkade to look for other folks who might be interested in putting Skinner's blueprint for a new kind of peaceful, egalitarian society into practice.

Eventually, five brave souls stepped up to the plate, and together with her husband and her teenage daughter, Kinkade went on to create what is known today as one of the most successful and remarkably enduring social experiments the communities movement has ever seen. While countless other '60s-era communes and outposts of radical thought imploded under the weight of disorganization, in-fighting, and economic hardship, Twin Oaks has managed to grow and thrive with each passing decade. Today, Twin Oaks is home to 85 adults, all living and working together alongside their 15 kids, 5 dogs, 6 cats, 3 ferrets, and 30 cows and chickens in a laborsharing, cottage-industry system.

Twin Oaks calls itself "a self-supporting and somewhat self-sufficient community." Each member is promised housing, food, health care, and personal spending money in exchange for working an assigned number of hours in any of the community's businesses or domestic roles. But the citizens of Twin Oaks are not only committed to achieving economic independence—they also strive to create what they call a "feminist culture." Intrigued by what that might look like, I traveled down below the Mason-Dixon line to catch a whiff of feminist utopia for myself.

Twin Oaks Road is a long dirt driveway that curves through pristine woodland, runs beside a breathtaking expanse of rolling green fields, and terminates at the white clapboard entrance to the community's front office. On the morning I arrived, the crops were teeming with the yield of late summer beneath a brilliant azure sky. As the car rolled to a stop, I spotted six tanned young people in tees and cutoffs, quietly harvesting big shiny peppers and tending to beans out in the field, while cows mooed their good-mornings from a dairy barn down the hill.

Inside the office, I was introduced to my host, Mala, a 28-year-old woman with a Chicago accent and a

laid-back but briskly efficient manner. Grabbing my bags, I followed Mala up a wooded path to my accommodations in Kaweah, one of nine housing structures dotting the mile-long main drag of the community. Kaweah combined the homey wood-plank architecture and clean outdoorsy aroma of a ski chalet with the hodgepodge utilitarian decor of your typical liberal arts college dorm, minus the television. Each of Twin Oaks' small living groups houses between 8 and 20 people in individual rooms. This arrangement was my first lesson in Twin Oaks feminism. As Mala explained it, people at Twin Oaks are all seen as individual entities, regardless of relationship status, so even if you come to the community already partnered with someone, or become partnered, you will always have your own individual room to do with as you wish. The room assigned to you by the community may or may not be in the same building as your partner's room, and considering some of the complicated Twin Oaks relationship dynamics I learned about later, this is probably a good thing.

After ditching my bags and taking a peek at the communal bathroom down the hall, I headed over to Zhankoye (aka ZK), the massive wooden dining hall and recreation center where lunch and dinner are served daily. Food supplies are always available in each household's residential kitchen, but with a rotating roster of cooks whipping up seasonal offerings twice a day, group dining here feels like a real occasion. Atypical Twin Oaks meal may include fresh-baked bread, just-picked organic produce, fruit from the orchard, honey from the beehives, milk, yogurt, cheese, and beef from the dairy, or tofu, tempeh, and soymilk made from homegrown soybeans. Because I arrived on a Wednesday, I was treated to a steaming plate of River's Famous Wednesday Mac 'n' Yeast. This kickass vegan concoction involving elbow macaroni, nutritional yeast and a blend of magical herbs and spices was so inexplicably cheesy, it could win over the palate of even the most devoted dairy-lover.

I had moved on from macaroni to a plate of organic greens with tahini-herb dressing when Val, a 38-year-old with a bright smile and an even brighter blond mullet wandered over to the picnic table I was sharing with Mala and her friends. Mala politely and efficiently made the introductions. "BUST? I love BUST!" declared Val, and in one fluid motion she set down her tray and whipped off her shirt. To their credit the guys at our table didn't even flinch, but there was something triumphant about the reckless glee with which Val proudly dangled her exposed ta-tas above her lunch plate that gave me the sense this was not an everyday occurrence. "This is something new," Mala confirmed, introducing me to the most recent piece of Twin Oaks feminist legislation. Apparently, when it comes to personal conduct, there aren't really many rules at Twin Oaks. Instead, there are socially enforced "norms" which govern day-to-day life. The Twin Oaks policy on toplessness had always dictated that since it was inappropriate for women to go topless in public, in the interest of gender equality, men, too, were prohibited from going topless in public, no matter how hot or strenuous their farm labor may be. However, this summer at a community meeting, the issue was raised that perhaps toplessness should be allowed for both genders. In response, this new nudity norm was established with the stipulation that the issue would be re-evaluated after a summer trial period. I could tell already which way Val would cast her vote.

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After lunch, Mala gave me an eye-opening tour of the community while explaining the ingenious motor that has kept this place going for 36 years: the Twin Oaks labor system. "This community has no group religion or charismatic leader," Mala began. "Instead, our labor credit system is the glue that keeps this community together. Members are required to maintain an average of 42 hours of work per week and can choose daily from any of 100 different work areas. A third of the work to be done at Twin Oaks is in one of our three cottage industries: hammock-making, tofu-making and book-indexing, which together bring in about \$2 million per year. From this income, members are each given \$75 per month as discretionary income and the rest of the money goes toward supporting all the vital needs of the

community [i.e. food, clothing, shelter, health care]." According to Mala, pocket money is usually spent on personal travel or on things like Ben & Jerry's Chunky Monkey, which is picked up by volunteers who drive into neighboring towns once a day.

Jobs like cooking, cleaning, and childcare," she continued, "and other work, like farming, dairy processing, and machine maintenance are all considered equal creditable forms of labor and earn the same hourly credits as our cottage industries." In other words, in the Twin Oaks system, tasks traditionally considered to be "women's work" carry as much weight as those jobs directly responsible for earning income. This is not to say, however, that division of labor here has anything to do with gender.

Women are mechanics here. Men here find great fulfillment in the realms of childcare and gardening. There is a general openness here to the concept of non-gender-traditional work," Mala explained.

"But what about all the yucky jobs?" I asked. After all, in a society where work is self-elected, who cleans the toilets? "Everyone must do one kitchen-cleaning shift per week," Mala explained, "but every other job gets filled through volunteering. When we submit our schedules to the labor coordinators, we decide how we want to plan our week and how much open space we want to leave. These free spaces are what allow for all the necessary job posts to be filled."

As for the bigger picture of community government, decision-making for the population of 100 is a family affair. "Overseeing everything is a rotating board of planners with two to four people on the board serving staggered terms," says Mala. "Current planners collect community input and appoint new planners. There is no community leader. Everyone at Twin Oaks has equal power and equal say."

At the conclusion of our tour, Mala handed me a sheet covered with the names of Twin Oakers, mostly young women with a smattering of men, who had signed up to tell me more about life on the farm. I met with them while they chopped veggies outside the kitchen and while they milked cows in the barn. Some took a moment between work shifts to sidle up next to me on a bench in the shady courtyard, and others chattered free and loose between sips of moonshine slurped out of a mason jar by the light of a crackling community bonfire.

Most of the people I spoke with were recent college graduates or recent college dropouts when they moved to Twin Oaks and had heard about the community's movement at their schools. That explained not only the collegiate atmosphere of the community, but also helped me to understand what Mala meant when she described new members as usually being "in a transitional stage of their lives." One such member is Summer, a 23-year-old woman with white-chick-dreadlocks who has been living at Twin Oaks since she completed her three-week membership application visit last February. "I was going to Oberlin College in Ohio for two years and then dropped out," she explained. "Oberlin is big into coops, and lots of people from my school visit Twin Oaks during their independent study terms. That's how I heard about it, through word of mouth. When I visited, the diversity of the labor system and the resource sharing I saw here made me want to stay." Others told me that just as WaldenTwo had been the catalyst for Kat Kinkade to start her new life, it was Kinkade's own book, *A Walden Two Experiment: The First Five Years of Twin Oaks Community*, that inspired them to follow in her footsteps. "I had read Kat Kinkade's book in the ninth grade, so I always knew that someday I wanted to visit," 22-year-old Meredith explained. "I finally came to visit two years ago while taking a break from my studies at Kenyon College, and loved the people and the land here so much, I just never left."

By all accounts, gaining new members is rarely a challenge at Twin Oaks—it's keeping them here that's tough. Tom Freeman, a 38-year-old father of two who's lived here for eight years, says he knows why. "The worst part of community living is having to live with the people you've broken up with and their

new partners. That is the biggest reason people leave," he revealed. "Families break up here and there's no support network for those in pain." Some community members are involved in "process teams," who come in at the request of an ailing couple to help broker a peaceful co-existence. Sometimes this does the trick, sometimes not "If a problem comes up, you need to process, to talk about it. It can be annoying and hard," a 21-year-old German ex-pat named Anja told me. "I have an ex-boyfriend here. Seeing him every day was hard, but we worked it out A lot of women here have to deal with that."

Rather than putting all of their emotional eggs in one person's basket some dodge the break-up blues by engaging in the popular Twin Oaks practice of polyamory. It is estimated that about half of the adults at Twin Oaks have explored this option of mutually consensual non-monogamy between partners, but of the women I spoke to, only two seemed really gung-ho about "poly" being the right choice for them. One was Phoenix, a freespirted former actress from Cincinnati who told me, "It's a great feeling not to be defined or dependent on one relationship when you can have multiple romantic relationships." The other woman was an enigmatic 31-year-old named Anissa whose family unit, known throughout the community as "the Star family," consists of herself, her two male lovers, her one female lover and her female lover's young son.

The two women I spoke to who arrived at Twin Oaks with their male partners in tow - Mala, my tour guide, and Mele, a 24-year-old dead ringer for Lauren Ambrose from *Six Feet Under* both admitted to experimenting with poly during their time at Twin Oaks. In Mele's case, it didn't work out, so she and her partner Sean, an avid knitter who moved with Mole to Twin Oaks from Chicago three years ago, elected to return to monogamy. As for Mala, her nineyear relationship with her partner Ezra is "as monogamous as it's ever been," now that a compromise has been reached between them not to carry on romantic relationships with other members. "Flings and hookups are still OK, though," she added.

Despite Tom's nookie-flight theory, the average length of a residency at Twin Oaks is a solid eight years. Interestingly enough, the two people I spoke with who had passed the eight-year mark were Val and Valerie. Val (my friend from lunch who's been hanging out at Twin Oaks for 16 years) confessed that now that her daughter Maia is about to graduate from the local high school, she's becoming a little restless. "I don't plan on always living here," she confided. "I've started to question what might be next now that my daughter is going to college." Valerie, on the other hand, a 36-year-old former college English teacher and researcher from Montreal who has been at Twin Oaks for ten years, hasn't yet felt the same wanderlust. "I have no immediate plans to go," she said, "but the rest of my life is a long time ... I've given up predicting what will happen."

As for the newbies, they all struck me as possessing a weird combination of honeymoon-stage fervor for community life and youthful confidence that there is more for them to explore in the world. "It's so comfortable here, it would be giving up a lot to move," Mole told me. "I think of leaving every time I get pissed off, though." Mole's partner, Sean the knitter, also seems pretty attached. "When I first moved here, I was behind on bills, so I figured not having to pay bills for six months or so while I live at Twin Oaks was a good idea. Now living here makes me feel much more intentional. I think sometimes I want to stay." There is also among the newer residents a pioneering contingent who aspire to one day start their own communities. "Twin Oaks is my home, I love it a lot," Anissa told me. "I'm very interested in starting my own community, but I can't imagine not living in a community now. It's nice to know I am a part of Twin Oaks' history."

There is an uncompromising idealism embedded in the citizenry of Twin Oaks, especially in those like Anissa who are looking forward to founding communities of their own one day. Not content to merely ditch all the trappings of privacy and personal accumulation, some members I spoke with want to see the community push its ideals even further. "I would like us to be more environmentally responsible," 36-year-old Debby Bors told me. "I would like it if we bought everything organic, installed more solar panels, got off the power grid. We could collect rainwater as well as using well water, and we should

stop using so many unnecessary chemicals, like Comet I'd also like it if we traded in our vehicles for hybrid cars."

Despite the daily revolutionary act of merely continuing to exist after 36 years, the people of Twin Oaks refuse to see an end to the struggle for independence they've begun. "We don't pretend to be some one or utopia was repeated tome over and over again like a mantra during the course of my visit. In fact the second book by Kinkade (who, at 72, recently moved to her own home near Twin Oaks and is reportedly in love with having her own space) is even titled Is it Utopia Yet? But on my trip home, after a hug from Mala and a bowl of homemade granola, the memory of something Anja said made me wonder if, for Twin Oaks, utopia is only a matter of time. "The people who live here come here from the outside world and bring in all their bullshit behavior," she told me, "but underneath, there is a desire to change. There are activists out there who say we're just hiding in the woods, not changing anything, but every day we are learning to consume less, to live more responsibly than they ever could. Things are getting better, but slowly."