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A Cultivated Community

The self-sustained Twin Oaks commune in Louisa County uses free-market pragmatism to preserve a place where free spirits can thrive

BY GARY ROBERTSON

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When you drive up the lane to the entrance of Twin Oaks, a commune of about 100 residents in the backwoods of Louisa County, what comes into view first are the gardens.

The well-tended, fecund soil serves as a metaphor for the commune's purposeful commitment to making its own way in its own good time.



Photo by Jay Paul

If you were looking for aimless sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, says one resident, you're probably thinking of some other place.

All told, Twin Oaks has about 3 acres of intensively nurtured gardens devoted to growing vegetables, herbs and the like. During harvest time, the crop of tomatoes, beans, melons, greens and squash is a cornucopia of things sweet and sour and filling.

Served fresh and canned, the vegetables from the gardens are the foundation of the commune's diet, along with milk and meat from its herd of 30 cattle. In all things, Twin Oaks strives to be self-sustaining.

Buildings, largely designed and constructed by the members themselves, are heated by wood grown on the property (about 80 cords a year are required) and by solar power; self-taught mechanics repair a small fleet of 17 vehicles; other members wash and mend clothes, which are shared by all; and the commune owns and maintains its own sewage treatment plant.

Twin Oaks encompasses more than 450 acres, from pastures to thick forests, with a river (the South Anna) running through it.

At its inception, Twin Oaks was a fragile concept born in a turbulent era of war, sexual revolution, women's rights and an awakening of individual freedom.

Communes sprouted throughout the country, but Twin Oaks — originally inspired by

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Walden Two, a novel by behavioral scientist B.F. Skinner — has done something that nearly all the others were unable to do.

It has survived.

The commune celebrates its 46th anniversary this year. Nonviolence, income sharing and equality are among its founding principles.

But there's also a strong appetite for work.

"People say, 'All these hippie communes failed during the '60s and '70s, and why are you still around?' " says Valerie, who, like most Twin Oakers, goes only by her first name. "There are lots of possible answers, but one is we have this backbone of our very powerful labor system. It ensures that the work that needs to get done, gets done."

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A Cultivated Community

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 Valerie handles inquiries from all over the world about Twin Oaks, and she also recruits for the community.

Right now, she doesn't need to recruit quite so hard because Twin Oaks has a waiting list of more than dozen prospective members. The average wait time before there's a vacancy in the community is six months.

"Largely, people come looking for us," Valerie says. "It's always a variation of this theme: 'I am looking for an alternative to the mainstream. I'm not getting what I want out of life living out here. I'm looking for something different, and I think you people may be onto it.'"



Ali Mills collects milk from one of the commune's 30 cows. *Photo by Jay Paul*

The labor system that Valerie mentions covers everything from the commune's principal profit-generating industries —making tofu and hammocks, growing heirloom seeds, and indexing books for academic presses and other clients — but also includes gardening work, housekeeping, child care, homeschooling and a myriad of other tasks that earn labor credits.

Twin Oaks asks each member to work 42 hours a week in some capacity, but when residents turn 50 years old, the work requirement is reduced by one hour, and another hour for every year after 50. Meticulous records and supervisory follow-ups keep the community humming.

Although there have been financial scares, as when Pier I Imports — for more than 30 years, Twin Oaks' biggest customer for hammocks — dropped the commune midway through the last decade, the community has done very well for itself.

A commune leader says the community has about \$2 million in cash, money-market funds and socially responsible investments, and he said gross sales from the commune's various businesses also approach about \$2 million annually.

Currently, Twin Oaks is modernizing and expanding its tofu operation with a \$1 million upgrade, and it recently completed a hospice for a few elderly residents who are moving toward the end of life.

Members cheerfully acknowledge that they are part of the capitalist system, albeit it with an extraordinary twist. While most capitalist enterprises are based on growth,

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Twin Oaks' model is based on cooperation and sharing.

Even after nearly half a century of existence, and despite a comprehensive website, TwinOaks.org, visitors still line up nearly every Saturday and make a \$5 donation for tours of Twin Oaks, because they want to know more about those who would choose this lifestyle.

On their tours of the commune, visitors typically seek details such as these:

The average age of residents is 42, though the age span ranges from toddlers to an 87-year-old. The average stay of a Twin Oaks resident is 8 years, and about 20 people leave annually.

Twin Oaks produces about 2,000 pounds of tofu every day, but when its production plant is enlarged, it will be able to produce three times that amount.

It also turns out approximately 5,000 to 6,000 hammocks every year.

Every resident has his or her own room, even though they may live with someone else and share public spaces in the community's dormitory-style living quarters.

The average level of education is four years of college, though some residents never completed high school, and others hold doctoral degrees.

A car and a community shopper go to the town of Louisa every day; to Charlottesville, three times a week; to Richmond, once a week.

Some residents are married and have children together, while some cohabitate. Relationships at the commune can be fluid. Heterosexuals, homosexuals, the transgendered and other variations are welcome.

Everyone receives about \$80 in monthly allowance. When you join Twin Oaks, the community doesn't want your money. But if you have some, you are required to keep it in a separate account and not access it until you decide to leave for good. That way, there's no hierarchy of wealth.

There is no live television permitted, though members do have access to the Internet, and some rent movies and television shows through Netflix.

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Alex, in his early 20s, is one of the newest members of Twin Oaks. He joined in 2010, not long after graduating from Bloomsburg University in Pennsylvania with a degree in mathematics, following a frustrating job search.

"In my generation, there's an assumption that after college you spend a couple of years exploring something interesting," Alex says. "I wanted to check out something that was income-sharing and secular and had communal living."

Instead of living with his parents, as many of his peers choose to do, and working at a minimum-wage job until something better comes along, Alex says that Twin Oaks groomed him to become co-manager of a thriving hammock business.

He's overseeing production schedules, calibrating the costs of raw materials and often handling sales.

"I'm managing a business and gaining a lot of useful skills at Twin Oaks, employable skills," Alex says.



Pablo Fuliano works in the Twin Oaks hammock shop, which produces 5,000 to 6,000 hammocks for sale each year. *Photo by Jay Paul*

Alex wears a dress sometimes, and that's not so unusual at Twin Oaks. In fact, the community even has a policy for it called "Addressing the Dress."

If a man is guiding a Saturday tour while wearing a dress, he is encouraged to explain why he has the dress on.

It's an effort to educate people about alternative gender norms at Twin Oaks.

Alex says he's only had one person ask him about the dress. It was a 6-year-old girl who came in with her father to buy a hammock.

"She said, 'Why are you wearing a dress? You're not a girl.' And I explained that it was comfy and cool."

After that, no more questions.

Devon Sproule, a folk and blues musician, is one of Twin Oaks' best-known former residents. She came to the commune with her hippie parents when she was just a couple of years old and lived there until she was 16, when she moved to

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Charlottesville to start a music career.

She's not a mega-star, but she has been able to sustain herself through tours of the United States, Canada and Europe, and she says the more she tours, the better an entertainer she's becoming.

Sproule, who turned 30 in 2012, says she cannot think of a single negative aspect of her Twin Oaks experience. When she decided to become a full-time musician, she received a lot of support from community members.

Growing up at Twin Oaks and constantly talking with adults in various social settings and work environments vastly improved her communication skills, she says, making her confident in herself and her ability to make a living in a difficult field.

"I think the main way that Twin Oaks shows up is in the songs I write ... in the natural setting of it, and the panoramic richness of the land," Sproule says.

One of the most difficult things she had to learn to adjust to after leaving Twin Oaks was her instinct to share everything, because that's how people treated objects at the commune.

"I had a good friend, Jessica, in the early stage of my music career, and she shared everything with me. Then we had this conversation, and she said people worked hard to buy things, and those things were theirs, even if they shared them. I just had to learn about ownership more," Sproule says.

Today, she keeps in touch with a network of former and current Twin Oakers, who are like an extended family.

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Sproule's father, Gordon, still resides at Twin Oaks, although her mother has moved out and now lives with another partner.

Before living at Twin Oaks, Gordon attended Carleton University in Canada, majoring in comparative religions, and he then resided for seven years in a community similar to Twin Oaks.

"I've just always really liked this lifestyle. It seems to suit me," he says.



One Twin Oaker said that Gordon was

A crew of workers take a break in the Llano kitchen after their first of two four-hour shifts tending the Twin Oaks vegetable gardens. *Photo by Jay Paul*

instrumental in steering the community toward making fabric hammocks as well as rope hammocks, which greatly expanded the hammock market and brought more economic stability.

With 29 years of tenure at Twin Oaks, Gordon feels he will be here the rest of his life. At age 60, he also has a new partner.

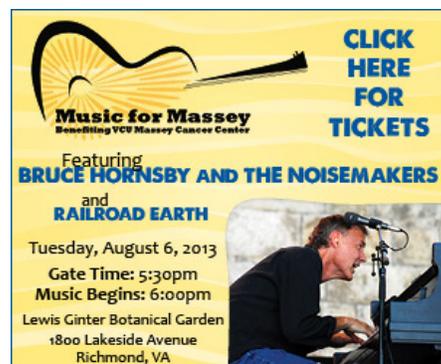
As a commune, Twin Oaks operates on vastly different economic principles than the country as a whole. Perhaps at no time was that more evident than during the economic meltdown of a few years ago.

For Twin Oaks residents, the recession went virtually unnoticed.

"Nothing changed," says Paxus, Twin Oaks' marketing manager. "Not a single person had to worry about not having a job. Everybody knew they would have their medical costs covered. Everybody knew they would have a car if they wanted to go someplace. Everybody knew there would be food and clothing and housing and all of it."

Paxus noted that by husbanding resources, by planning for the ups and downs of the business cycle, by paying careful attention to the operation of its businesses, and by sharing its income communally, Twin Oaks had been prepared for the recession in ways that many in the outside world were not.

One of Twin Oaks' stated objectives at its founding was to help other similar communities form.



Perhaps its most successful example is the Acorn Community in Mineral, which spun off in 1993.

Situated 7 miles from Twin Oaks on 72 acres of farmland, Acorn has about two dozen members, plus a waiting list of those who want to join.

Twin Oaks provided Acorn with a loan to purchase property and originally gave its members jobs in the Twin Oaks hammock business.

A little more than a decade ago, in 1999, Acorn acquired the Southern Exposure Seed Exchange, which specializes in heirloom and open-pollinated varieties of vegetables, herbs and flowers.

Sales of Southern Exposure's products have increased eight times since Acorn acquired the business, a manager says. And today, Acorn employs Twin Oaks to grow heirloom seeds and to service more than 70 stores that carry the seeds.

Not long ago, Twin Oaks aided in the establishment of another alternative community, the Living Energy Farm (LEF), which is on 127 acres in Louisa County. Twin Oaks members are contributing 1,000 hours of free labor to help the sister community get its footing.

The Living Energy Farm's objective is to live without fossil fuel; for example, using oxen and other draft animals to plow fields. LEF plans to use organic farming methods in planting orchards and field crops, and to offer workshops on how others might emulate some of their methods.

Children have long been part of Twin Oaks. About a dozen reside there now. Community guidelines suggest that 15 are about the limit.

For years, Twin Oaks raised children communally. That is, the children were cared for by persons other than their parents, and they lived in separate buildings.

That practice largely ended in the late '90s, when Twin Oaks parents asserted themselves and insisted on taking back the traditional duties of child rearing, though residents still keep a close eye on each other's children.

Keenan, who has lived at Twin Oaks for 29 years, said none of the children raised communally chose to live at the commune. But he said children raised by their own parents are staying.

Keenan's son, Rowan, a tall 16-year-old who has been homeschooled at the commune, is undecided about his future.

"I'm planning on going to college and getting the real-world experience and all that. But I don't know really what I want to do right now," says Rowan, who has curly, cascading red hair and a 100-watt smile.

To assist children who have grown up in the community with their education, Twin Oaks provides several thousand dollars a year in financial aid if they enroll in a Virginia community college or four-year institution.

Twin Oaks has what its members call a stimulating social life that includes dances and music, community meals, seminars on members' expertise, reading groups, almost weekly games of Ultimate Frisbee, and instruction on everything from cooking to house-building.

The community is governed by a rotating group of planners who make overall decisions for the community, although they can be overruled through a democratic process.

A long list of managers, largely operating independently, oversee everything from bicycle repairs to tofu production.

Calvin is manager of tofu operations. He's 34 years old and has been at Twin Oaks for five years.

Because Twin Oaks' name is on the tofu package, Calvin says, customers along the East Coast and beyond have found an entry point to visit and tour the commune.

"It's been sort of an education, running a business while living at a commune," Calvin says with a laugh.

Making tofu, he says, also fulfills his desire to help people reduce their impact on the planet.

"It's something we can get behind, because it helps people eat lower on the food chain. You can feed a lot more people tofu than you could feed them beef."

Part of the product's appeal, he says, is that many people are looking for simpler foods these days.

The tofu business also has created jobs outside the community among Virginia farmers who raise the organically grown soybeans from which the tofu is made.

Calvin says it would be hard to duplicate the life he has at Twin Oaks — managing the production of a wholesome product like tofu, having a connection with a large number of like-minded people, and being able to jump in a pond, paddle a canoe or enjoy a stream of seasonal fresh foods.

Asked to define Twin Oaks, Calvin fell back on a phrasing that you hear a lot at the commune.

"I guess the easiest way to say it is that it's like being in a college dormitory or being in a summer camp. And those are environments that I enjoyed a lot growing up."

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