



## Living the nude life

Shannon Higgins explores the lifestyle that has some students stripping down to escape the post-secondary environment that is rife with image consciousness and competition

Chad Lannon went to the wrong university. The University of Western Ontario had far too many BMWs and popped collars for his taste. While his business classmates were all busy networking and planning their stock portfolios, Lannon was living free.

As a naturist, Lannon, 24, feels most comfortable naked and outside.

At Western he disliked his trust fund peers and couldn't connect to the hard-partying frat boys. Instead he swam naked with middle aged people and their kids during nudist night at a community pool. "I felt grateful that I could just be me and not worry about wearing the right clothes or having the right cologne. I felt like [my peers] were jumping through hoops."

Lannon dabbled with the idea of starting a naturist club at Western, but feared it would draw loads of frat boys just wanting to see naked women. He trudged through the program — keeping naturism separate from school.

"I really kind of regret the whole venture. In naturism you're not trying to sell yourself — you're just being yourself. You're not looking to accumulate wealth or things...At Western they're just too shallow, superficial and

addicted to clothing."

Post-secondary education is all about image. Students learn to package and sell themselves to get ahead while the prestige of their program determines whether employers give their resumes that crucial second glance. But for students like Lannon, naturism is an escape from the image obsessed rat race. And while the law prevents him from showing up to class in the nude, naturism offers opportunity and networking of a different kind. One where being genuine is the only prerequisite.

In the 1940s naturist clubs started popping up in Canada. The first clubs were taboo and kept top secret, and many had strict rules about alcohol, tobacco and sex.

"You have to imagine back then, you couldn't tell anyone you were a naturist. You might as well tell them you're an axe murderer," said Stéphane Deschênes, a director for the Federation of Canadian Naturists (FCN) and the owner of Bare Oaks, a family naturist park just outside of Newmarket.

"You had to be married; you had to show your marriage license. When you were here you could not use last names. There was no touching, no holding hands."

During the sexual revolution of the

sixties, a shift towards liberalism loosened the tight restrictions on the clubs. People were no longer interrogated before entering, and being married was no longer necessary. This opened the scene up to younger adults.

Lannon was 16 when he first explored nudism. Right after getting his driver's license, he drove to the nearest nude beach. After that, nude swims became the norm. "I had seen some articles online," he said. "The more I thought about it, the more it made sense."

The girls he dated, however, weren't as comfortable ditching their clothes in public.

Lannon was up at Bare Oaks, when he met Nikki Lafrance. Lafrance, 23, was working as a receptionist and tour-guide for the summer before starting her recreation and leisure program at Sir Stanford Fleming College in Peterborough. After a mutual friend introduced them, the two quickly hit it off and soon started dating. For Lafrance, starting out with the clothes off was refreshing.

"It's an amazing ground to meet somebody. Because in comparison to the typical ground to meet somebody — you know you get all dressed up and you go out and you ask all those ques-

tions and it's all very awkward," said Lafrance. "When you're nude there's no sense in covering up who you actually are. We really just met each other exactly as we are and there was none of that nonsense."

But she wasn't always at ease at Bare Oaks. She was 19 the first time she went with her mother and stepfather and the nudity made her uncomfortable.

"I just looked at myself and only saw the flaws the first time. I didn't like it."

She finally fell in love with Bare Oaks this past summer when she went again with her family to the summer trailer they now have on the grounds.

"It was the very first time that I finally felt I fit in and belonged [anywhere]," she said, remembering feeling out of place her entire life. "I used to wish for there to be some private expedition to another planet where they were going to start over new civilization. And I was like 'pick me' because I just don't fit in on this one. But I realized that where I wanted to go was just to a naturist resort, really. There was all that non-judgment and respect that everybody had for each other."

Lafrance helped Lannon figure out what to do after Western. She told him he didn't seem like the business type

Clockwise from left: Chad Lannon au naturel in nature at Bare Oaks Family Naturist Park. PHOTO COURTESY OF NIKKI LAFRANCE; Naturalists at Bare Oaks enjoy the brand new dock; Naturalists play in Bare Oaks' volleyball tournament; Stéphane Deschênes, Bare Oaks owner, leans on a warning sign on the edge of his resort; Naturalists ditch the dock and dive in. PHOTOS COURTESY OF STÉPHANE DESCHÊNES; Nikki Lafrance looks out over the bridge at Bare Oaks; Lafrance and Lannon will be moving in with each other in September. PHOTOS COURTESY OF NIKKI LAFRANCE

and gave him the push he needed to rush into the massage therapy program at Sir Stanford Fleming.

"Meeting Nikki made the decision easier," he said. "Massage therapy is very holistic and very natural. There's almost something spiritual about working with your hands."

If she could, Lafrance would be naked all the time. "It just felt so natural and so great to have the sun on your body...It's almost spiritual actually. I view my body as just a vessel that carries me from place to place and that's why I don't have a problem with other people seeing it ... it's not who I am."

"It's very comfortable to be naked," said Miriam Kaufman, an adolescent health specialist at Sick Kids and associate professor of adolescent sexuality at the University of Toronto. Kaufman says the naturist lifestyle is understandably alluring.

"I think that politically, that might be very attractive to young people — that idea of being seen beyond your body and your clothes. It's kind of an anti-fashion statement, right? And you can see how that might be really attractive to a lot of people," she said.

Still, some men who are interested in naturism are terrified of getting an erection on their first visit to a natur-

ist park and some women think they'll lose their mystery. But Deschênes said most of those concerns come from the biggest myth about naturism: that it's all about sex.

"The only experience you have with nudity in a non-naturist world is sexual," he said. Adding that at the resorts, erections rarely happen (and if they do, it's best to cover it discreetly with your towel until it subsides).

"Sex has nothing to do with nudity. The nudity is the tool to get you to the acceptance of self, acceptance of others and acceptance and awareness of the environment. The nudity is what gets you there," said Deschênes.

But, in Canada, public nudity is still illegal.

Nudity is covered under Section 173 and 174 of the Canadian Criminal Code. The first deals with indecent acts like flashing a school bus full of children. The second deals with any nudity, on private or public property where people can see from a public place. So mowing the front lawn naked could lead to an arrest. But few people are ever charged because the Attorney General, who has to consent to the charge, is usually too busy.

Regardless, naturists feel the law is restrictive.

"You're born naked. It should be a natural human right," said Lannon.

When Lafrance and Lannon's relationship ventured out into the textile world, nothing really changed.

"We still do the naked thing up in my room. But I live with six other people, so they're not really into us walking round naked," joked Lafrance.

She left Bare Oaks last summer feeling beautiful and self-confident. "I was completely care-free, loved my body and didn't have a complaint about it all summer."

But going back to school in September and having to wear clothes again was a little difficult. At school, it was easy for her to start comparing herself to other women in tight low-rise jeans and curve hugging dresses.

So Lafrance plans to keep naturism a big part of her life. "Ideally, if my dreams come true, it's my big goal right now to own and operate my own nudist resort."

Until then, she is hoping to snag a job on a naked cruise ship for her upcoming work placement.

This summer, the couple will be working together at Bare Oaks and in September they'll be moving in to their own apartment — where they can be naked as much as they like.