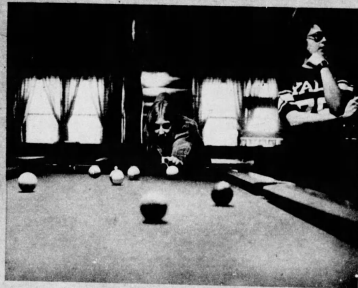




# A WOMAN'S PLACE

By Mary Rita Kurycki



Above, Grace Coleman (left) and Judy Schenck shoot a game of pool at Northwoods, a resort next-door to A Woman's Place.

Naomi Coleman cradled her 17-year-old daughter Grace in her lap and whispered: "Baby, I miss you so much, but I'm happy you're here even though it means being away from me."

Naomi and Grace were in the kitchen of A Woman's Place in Athol, Warren County. The scene's a common one there — women sitting around drinking peppermint tea or beer or gin and tonic and talking, hugging, comforting.

Naomi comes up most weekends to visit with the women and her daughter, members of a collective running this women's retreat in the Adirondacks. Naomi Coleman, 39, is director of a drug rehabilitation program in Newburgh. She came to A Woman's Place this weekend because "frankly, I needed a fix."

It was not drugs to which she referred but the spiritual uplift she gets from spending a weekend

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here, away from her everyday world, with women "who care enough to dig beyond my facade." Drugs, as a matter of fact, are strictly forbidden at A Woman's Place.

A Woman's Place is any woman's place. It's a 23-acre haven for any woman who needs to get away and relax or think or just be with other women. It's a collective of eight women and five children who are interested in helping other women. They've come together principally to run a for-women-only retreat.

A Woman's Place was once the Moose Mountain Lodge, a hunting hideaway. It includes a pond (for summer swimming and winter skating), a recreation hall (with pool table, pinball machines, juke box and bring-your-own-booze bar), a main lodge and four cabins. There's room for 30 visitors.

It's located 10 miles northwest of Warrens-

**'My husband  
can't believe I'm doing  
all these things'**

burg. That's about 270 miles from Rochester and 240 miles from New York City.

Women normally come to A Woman's Place for a two-day weekend, but they're welcome anytime. Rates, on a sliding scale according to ability to pay, are \$10 to \$25 per day.

"We're not therapists, and we're not the Holiday Inn. We're just women who are saying: 'Look, we've been there,'" said 33-year-old Marie Deyoe, founder of the retreat.

The women have, indeed, been there. Some had felt trapped in wrong marriages, others had returned to school searching for meaning in their lives, and at least one survived several suicide attempts trying to deal with suppressed lesbian feelings.

A Woman's Place has been their salvation, they said.

Their poster, "A Woman's Place . . . We are each other's strength," says it for them.

Ms. Deyoe married when she was barely out of her teens. After 13 years of marriage she had a beautiful home, a pool, two children and a husband who earned \$20,000 a year. She felt guilty. She decided there should be more to her life. Finally, she went back to school to get a degree. "My husband thought I was silly to go

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Photos By Jim Laragy

Above, sign marks entrance to 23-acre retreat for women in the Adirondacks. Left, Pam Deyoe (left) Buckwheat Turner and Cindy Lawton. Ms. Turner left her final semester of graduate work in library science to come to A Woman's Place where she helps out as a plumber.

# 'The uniform is jeans, work shirts, hiking boots, no bras and no makeup'

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back to school and to want to have a career. The conflict over that led to our breakup."

Her feelings of guilt, confusion and unhappiness became so overwhelming, Ms. Deyoe said, that she joined a women's group for "sisterhood and support." She found peace for herself and decided then that she wanted to counsel other women and help them find their own peace.

From her friendship with several women and her decision that women must help each other, the concept of a woman's retreat was born.

The retreat is run on an unstructured program that includes living and working with other women, consciousness-raising sessions, outdoors recreation and, at times, workshops on such things as meditation and oriental foot massage. The women participate if and when they wish, or, if all they want is to be left alone to sit in their cabins and read, that's all right, too.

"Most women come here looking very scared. They don't know what to expect," Ms. Deyoe said. "Unfortunately, a lot of women's centers, women's organizations, just don't have the sisterhood they should. Women haven't been able to feel comfortable with women. Here, it's different. We don't exclude or put down anyone, no matter what level of self-awareness they're at. We accept each as a sister."

You could walk into A Woman's Place and feel you're home within minutes. There's no formal welcoming committee. You're just sort of absorbed into the "family." You could find yourself making that evening's supper salad within your first hour there and talking intimately with women whose names you've yet to learn.

The uniform at the retreat is jeans, work shirts, hiking boots, no bras and no make-up.

Although women often enter the retreat somewhat fearful of what they'll find, some 80 per cent of the more than 600 visitors have been more than once and about 50 per cent have asked to join the collective, Ms. Deyoe said.

"If they want to come here to run away, that's okay as long as it's only for a weekend or so. But those we let join us can't be running away. They can't come here and drain us of the little energy we have. We've got to save that energy for the retreatants," she said.

Many women think A Woman's Place must be utopia, Ms. Deyoe said. But it isn't.

There are complaints: the children don't get enough discipline, important telephone messages never get delivered, the children's mothers sleep late and other women (several of whom definitely never plan to be mothers) get stuck dressing and feeding the kids.

*Marie Deyoe, left, Meg Opalka, Buckwheat Turner and Naomi Coleman participate in consciousness-raising session in main lodge.*

It costs a minimum of \$2,400 a month to keep A Woman's Place in operation. Fees charged come nowhere near covering that, Ms. Deyoe said. Donations, including \$5,000 from the Family and Women's Advocacy Service in Schnectady, help.

Members of the collective, most of whom left good jobs to come to A Woman's Place, had been looking for work in the nearby towns with little luck. There was even discussion of some of the women having to apply for welfare.

In spite of occasional bickering and money worries, the life-style of the collective was generally peaceful, very low-key. Most are late-risers and breakfast is whatever you want to fix. Lunch, too, is a casual affair. Only dinner, served in the large dining room around long tables, is a communal meal. The women rotate cooking duties, but everyone works together to set the table and clean up. Even a casual suggestion that someone was needed to dry dishes brought a prompt reaction from four or five women.

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*Right, cooperation, whether in moving a washing machine or feeding someone else's child, is a natural part of the low-key atmosphere at A Woman's Place.*

The members of the collective had been taking courses through New York State's Board of Co-operative Educational Services. Marie Deyoe took carpentry and this particular winter weekend she was busy building a counter and shelves in the cramped office.

Buckwheat Turner, a collective member who left her final semester of library science graduate work in Colorado to come to A Woman's Place, is the plumber.

Judy Schenck, a former newspaper woman and former Yale University public relations woman, chops wood and gets a thrill tearing apart and rebuilding an automobile carburetor. "My husband (from whom she's separated) can't believe I'm doing all these things and that I own a jigsaw now." Ms. Schenck's hands were occupied most of the weekend with a wood rabbit she was whittling.

Several of the women especially enjoy a karate class they attend weekly.

The television is seldom on at A Woman's Place. "My kids were addicted to TV before we came here," said Martha Courtot, 33. Now her children — Cindy, 4, Heather, 9, and Thea, 11 — write poetry, draw, listen to records or read. During the day they play on the pond or go sledding on a nearby hill.

Most evenings the women break into small groups, going to their rooms to talk or play guitars. Sometimes they'll walk down to Northwoods, a nearby resort for horse-riders and snowmobilers, and have a drink before the fireplace.

They try to be as independent as possible, amazing themselves at times with how much they can do.

When a fan-belt broke on the snowblower they struggled, but managed to replace it. When a washer and dryer needed to be moved some 50 yards through almost knee-deep snow, they all piled out to carry them, 10 women per machine.

The serious work of moving the machines, like most other communal work that weekend, began and ended with sisterly hugging, games of chase and snowball fights.

The collective members are very affectionate. Hugging, kissing on the lips and pats on the shoulder or behind are an integral part of their life-style. Many women warm to the affection immediately. Others feel ill-at-ease for a few hours, Ms. Deyoe said. "But, then, we don't hug someone if it's obvious they're not ready for it."

Women, and men too, need a lot of affection, the women said.

There aren't any men at A Woman's Place and they don't encourage male visitors, but they have male friends. Only one woman, a weekend visitor, revealed herself vehemently anti-man and anti-marriage.

Some women have left their husbands after a weekend spent at A Woman's Place, but they were already ready to do so before retreating, one woman said. Many more women have decided to make their lives, and marriages,



*Above, Marie Deyoe (far left), Judy Schenck and Cindy and Heather Lawton breakfast in the dining room. The women rotate cooking duties. Left, Martha Courtot and Marie Deyoe (right), take a break in the lodge kitchen. Ms. Deyoe said most women's centers, 'just don't have the sisterhood they should.'*

work. The collective members encourage weekend visitors to talk and thus think things out for themselves. They don't give advice, they said, they merely try to provide an atmosphere for thinking and learning to love yourself.

"I never wanted to come here originally," Naomi Coleman said. "I was afraid to, but since the first time last summer I've just kept coming back. I was the first woman in this state to direct a drug program. It was at first a period of self-depreciation for me. I had always looked to those around me for my self-esteem. But being in charge, I didn't get much feedback. The people here asked me: 'How do you feel about yourself?' I had to take a good look at myself. And the more I ventilated, the more came out.

"I bought an avocado in the store the other day. It was really ripe. I opened it to the seed, I wanted to grow it. The hull had cracked and already it had begun to grow a green sprout. You can feel so unlovely at times but you're like that avocado, ready to grow once you've been opened a crack. There's a lovely thing inside you ready to grow and ready to blossom."

Most Saturday nights the women head for the recreation barn, plug in the jukebox and dance. They jitterbug, Charleston, do the bump, or whatever they like. Some shoot pool, play ping-pong, share a beer.

The women have been accepted into the community more easily than they'd expected. "Oh, we received a few threats," Marie Deyoe said. "Name-calling. You know, 'the dykes on

the hill' and all that." And once or twice, the women said, a truck has pulled up with some beer-swilling males shouting obscenities.

"You should hear the stories that people circulate. According to them anything could be going on up here," Ms. Coleman said, laughing.

The day-to-day goings-on at A Woman's Place would probably be disappointing to gossiping males (and females) of the neighboring region. Some of the women are lesbians, but the normal activities don't include sex orgies and the like, the women said.

Perhaps more typical is this scene before a Saturday supper: Thea Lawton, Martha Courtot's daughter, was curled up on the sofa writing in her diary when Ms. Courtot sat down beside her and gave her a kiss. "I love you, Thea," Martha said. "Let me read what you're writing."

"Mommy, it's a diary. You can't read it."

"Oh, please, Thea," Martha said, tousling Thea's hair.

"All right, but only this far, and never after this . . . I love you, too, Mommy."

"And I love you, too, Mommy," Cindy, 4, shouted from across the room. "I love you, and I'm bringing you this kiss."

Nothing sensational. Nothing to fear. It's really just a place where any woman can go to be reassured that:

"It's all right to be a woman."

