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Fat Times in New Haven



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Fat Liberation Front members at the home of Karen Scott-Jones, seated in front of her husband, Darryl, in New Haven. Others are Aldebaran, left, and Sharon Bas Hannah.

(photograph has been reduced from original size)

KAREN SCOTT-JONES and the 12 other members of the New Haven Fat Liberation Front are tired of being called plump, portly, corpulent, statuesque, ample and overweight. "We're fat," said Mrs. Scott-Jones, who weighs 340 pounds, "and people shouldn't be afraid to call us that. It's a descriptive adjective like 'tall' or 'short,' not a dirty word."

The Fat Liberation Front is also tired of - and angered by - what its members consider society's bias against them. Fat people, Mrs. Scott-Jones said, are consistently denied job opportunities, promotions, health insurance coverage and adequate medical care simply because they weigh more than what society considers normal.

"Discrimination against fat people is so common and widely accepted in this country that even fat people don't contest it," she said. "We've been brainwashed into believing that we are somehow responsible for our 'condition' and deserve all the ridicule we get."

It is that kind of thinking that Mrs. Scott-Jones, through the auspices of the Fat Liberation

Front, wants to change. Four months ago she, her husband, and two other women who had been active in the Los Angeles-based Fat Underground before moving East, founded the group and dedicated themselves to "re-educating" the public, the medical community and fat people themselves about the nature of obesity and society's reaction to it. The group meets whenever they feel the need to discuss their own feelings about their bodies, to write literature for distribution to the media, and to plan educational programs designed to help raise the consciousness of fat people in the community.

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unhealthy for us to try to be thin'

"We're a little different from other organizations designed for fat people," Mrs. Scott-Jones said. "Our orientation is radical, which means we are completely opposed to dieting and condemn those doctors who recommend it as healthy. We believe, and medical statistics bear us out, that diseases common among fat people are not a result of weight per se, but of the harmful effects of constant dieting. Most fat people are genetically disposed to be that way. It would be unnatural, and ultimately unhealthy, for us to try to be thin."

An equally important factor in the frequency of heart disease and high blood pressure among fat people, Mrs. Scott-Jones believes, is the emotional stress that fat people are forced to live with on a daily basis.

Dr. Robert Shemin, an endocrinologist and assistant professor of medicine at Yale University who has treated and conducted research on metabolic diseases and obesity for five years, said that there is a role for organizations like the Fat Liberation Front. However, he stressed that such groups should not be considered a solution for everyone.

"Groups of this type may be psychologically supportive to a limited number of obese people," he said, "but I would never recommend that all obese people stop trying to lose weight and remain heavy. Each case must be considered individually by a physician from both a medical and psychological standpoint."

"There is no question, however, that obesity of itself can lead to diabetes, hypertension and cholesterol abnormalities and that those diseases can be reversed with weight loss," Dr. Shemin said.

"It is safe to say that most obese people who do lose weight feel better and have a longer life expectancy than those who don't. Certainly no one should ever assume that responsible dieting is bad for them or that diseases connected to obesity are related to stress."

The Fat Liberation Front disassociates itself from marginal cases--those [TEXT MISSING HERE] necessary pounds. But they say that the definition of fat is subjective.

"Basically we think that if you feel fat, are regarded by others as fat, and are discriminated against because of it, you are fat," Mrs. Scott-Jones said. "Of course women are considered 'overweight' far more readily than men are. A businessman's paunch may indicate a degree of prosperity, and is accepted as such, but on a woman it would be intolerable."

But it has not always been so, said Sharon Bas Hannah, a poet and founding member of the group who weighs 210 pounds. "Weight is really a function of fashion," she said. "As recently as 1930 a woman was considered ideal if she wore a size-16 dress. Today it's a

size 8."

It was in fact the prejudices of the fashion industry that led Mrs. Scott-Jones to her present career as a designer of clothing for fat women.

"It's impossible to find clothes that fit well, are reasonably priced and have a sense of style if you're fat," said Mrs. Scott-Jones, who named her year-old Andover-based company Abundantly Yours. "So I started making my own. What I didn't realize is that thousands of fat women feel just as deprived as I did."

The clothes, which are sold through a mail-order catalog and are modeled by members of the Fat Liberation Front, include evening gowns, sportswear, lingerie and, new this spring, a bikini. Ready-made sizes range from 18 to 60; over size 60, clothes are custom-made. Mrs. Scott-Jones said she had no annual sales figures because her company was still new, but she said that the response has been tremendous. After a wire-service article spread news of the company worldwide, she received 8,000 catalog requests from women throughout the United States and in Europe, South America and Canada.

The Fat Liberation Front recognizes that dispelling existing and largely negative stereotypes will be a long and difficult process. "Right now," said Mrs. Scott-Jones, "people look at us and assume that we are gluttons, that we are lazy and undisciplined. We figure it will be 20 years before we see any measurable change in attitude. But in the meantime we'd like to work on legislation that will protect us from that kind of bias.

"It's hard for most people to understand the frustration of being fat in a thin world. Many of the things that people take for granted are impossibilities for us. I can't go to a movie, or buy shoes, or even take public transportation because there's always the possibility that I won't be physically comfortable."

Miss Bas Hannah said: "Many of the freedoms that slender women enjoy are barred to us psychologically. We'd like to have attractive clothes, to dance or run along a beach too. But we've been taught to be embarrassed about our bodies. Until we learn to reject the dieting routine and accept ourselves the way we are, we'll never make any progress.

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