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Group Contends 'Fat Is Beautiful'

by Nancy Pappas

Most 25-year-old women who weigh in at 360 pounds would be subsisting on lettuce and black coffee or rushing out to join Weight Watchers.

Not Karen Jones of Andover. She is not on a diet, she's chairman of the Connecticut chapter of a group dedicated to the proposition that "fat is beautiful"--the National Association to Aid Fat Americans (NAAFA).

"I had gone on diets," she said, "but long before I joined NAAFA, I had concluded it was totally hopeless. I decided I could spend the rest of my life worrying about my weight or I could live as a human being."

She argues that the main problem facing fat people is not their weight, but the negative image our culture imposes on them.

NAAFA's mission is to overcome that bad self-image, she explained.

"It's a matter of consciousness raising," she said. We're just beginning to realize that it's not all our fault. It's conditioning, and it's society. "The pressures on fat people are just enormous."

Thinness is so valued, she said, that there have been documented cases of young women starving themselves to death by dieting so fanatically they can no longer digest food properly.

Ms. Jones likened "fat liberation" to black liberation, but said fat people still have a long way to go.

"It's still okay to make fat jokes, but nobody would dream of making a racial joke," she pointed out.

It's worse for women than for men, said Ms. Jones, "because women are valued on what they look like, and men are valued on what they do."

The bias even extends to clothing, she said. Large men have an easier time finding clothes that fit them than large women do, she said.

NAAFA members have also begun fighting discrimination by colleges and employers, Jones said.

She said that although she was graduated in the top 5 percent of her high school class, she was denied admission to the college of her choice, while a thin classmate with the same credentials got in.

And when she finally was admitted to Syracuse University she was still rejected by its education school.

"The interviewer told the dean he was not allowing me in because of my weight," she said.

So far Ms. Jones hasn't been able to find a job. She's improvised by running her own crafts business, and designing and sewing clothes for fat women.

NAAFA also warns its members of hazardous fad diets and other reducing techniques.

"You'd be amazed at the extreme things people are pressed into doing to lost [sic] weight," Ms. Jones said, such as having an operation to bypass about 17 feet of small intestine to reduce food absorption.

Fat people who diet repeatedly, only to gain weight back again, may be doing themselves more harm than good, she said.

"Studies have shown it's less damaging to the body to maintain a stable weight," she said.

Though traditionally fat people have been thought to get that way just by eating too much, recent research has shown that "the majority of fat people eat just about the same amount as a majority of thin people," Ms. Jones claimed.

Anyone--fat or just sympathetic--is eligible to join NAAFA. The organization puts out a monthly newsletter, holds an annual national convention and runs a pen-pal and dating service to ease the social isolation of many fat persons.

Prospective Connecticut members may write Ms. Jones at (*address deleted because out of date*).

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