

INTRODUCTION TO OURSELVES

Ann Wakefield as told to by Ann Wakefield, Phoebe Walmisley, Suzanne Pharr, Kris Pott-harst, and Veronica Mullin

This was written so that we would have the opportunity to tell other women how we formed the women's collective we are now living in, the various practical problems we came across, and the solutions we discovered. It is by no means meant as a guidebook to collective living, but as an introduction to one, and as far as we know the only, women's collective now functioning in New Orleans.

Living in a women's collective is something else. Something else than living 'at home', be it with parents, husband, lover or roommates. To understand the difference between living with female roommates and living in a women's collective, one must understand the difference between girlfriends and 'sisters'. For the woman who is serious about reassessing her identity as a human being and wanting to increase her involvement with the Women's Movement beyond the purely intellectual stage, a women's collective offers a good environment.



The idea of our collective formed in the head of one woman last spring, was discussed with her roommate throughout the summer, and was developed, verbalized, and planned along with two more of us in the fall. Each of us was searching for a non-sexist, responsible, and free living relationship. And, very important, we were all committed to living our feminist politics. One of us was living with her parents, with all the dependence and protection we know that means. She wanted to 'make it on her own' economically, politically, and socially, but not in marriage or in a one-to-one lover relationship. Another one of us had recently returned to her mother's house after a long enough successful marriage --- successful in that it had not crippled her completely. The third and fourth were roommates, both very much involved in local women's movement activities and both dissatisfied (or rather limited) by the roommate set-up. The eventual fifth came to us after having been attacked by a rapist in her front yard one Sunday morning at 10:30. Thanks to a lot of courage and a lot of luck, she narrowly escaped. She found out the hard way that a woman living alone in our society lives in danger.

We had these things in common: we rejected the options of living alone or in a couple relationship, we all felt the need for a feminist supportive base, and we all respected and liked each other. A few sketchy guidelines were decided upon -- we were each to have our own bedroom (a 'room of one's own' is not to be slighted, even under the most ideal living conditions). We would not have children living in the collective, since none of us had ever had a child, and we all felt incapable of coping with that dimension just yet. We wanted one definite: communal meal a day, and we were to share the expenses and chores evenly.

It didn't take too long to get these things straight -- it took a bit longer to find a suitable house. We had to match up the right size house (we really wanted at least 6 women in our collective, but it proved to be impossible), the right landlord/lady (not everyone respects the fact that so many women want to live together), the right rent, and the right neighborhood (we wanted to live uptown with handy access to busses and streetcars).

After hunting for weeks, we finally did find a house, and we all signed the lease. This turned out to be a wise thing to do. Verbal agreements are not contractual when it comes to renting. If only one of us had signed the lease at the beginning, the rest of us would end up without a lease if that one person should ever move. And without a lease the landlord/lady has no obligation regarding term of stay.

The first few weeks in our collective home were exhausting and stimulating ones. Besides all the normal hassles of moving, getting the water turned on, phones installed, locks on the door, etc., we also had to start from scratch on building our more non-tangible environment. We had no history of collective living, no do's and don'ts. We had nothing but ourselves and our ideas of how we wanted to live our lives. No roles to play, no ingrained power expectations, no fairy tales to make come true. Collective decision-making sessions helped us deal with ourselves in a group living situation, and allowed us to draw our support and strength from each other. The beginning weeks were therapeutic ones for all of us, and when they were over, we had a supportive, learning environment in which we were able to live.

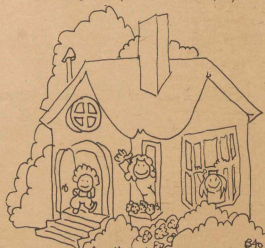
We had just been in our four-meal long enough to feel really great together, when our fifth and (due to the physical limitations of the house) last woman



moved in. We learned fast that four is cozy, but five is a collective. Restructuring our newly designed patterns around five made us rethink some daily living practices.

For one thing, the chores. We had decided to have our 'required' communal meals at dinner time, Monday through Thursday, leaving the weekends open. With just four of us, this four-day week was very convenient -- each of us had to cook and wash only once a week. With five, we had to restructure the arrangement, keeping the four day system, but adding more chores to the list. Our clean-when-you-want-to method was not exactly working. Needless to say, such a system has the woman with the lowest filth threshold doing all the housework, causing feelings of exploitation on one hand and guilt on the other.

Another problem was money. The five of us represented a salary range from \$200 a month to \$600 (net). It was therefore inequitable to divide the expenses equally among us. We found that if we each contributed 25% of our monthly income, we would be able to pay for rent, food, heat, utilities, and phone bills. By taking turns each month handling the bill-paying and food shopping, we are all becoming more experienced in the managing of finances. We, as women, have been semi- or completely economically dependent on others long enough. For two of us in our collective, this was our first experience in handling money. And we are, by the



way, doing a marvelous job. By planning our meals and shopping responsibly, our food bill is never more than \$25 a week for the five of us. And we eat well and often have guests.