

Welcome to the Commune Where 100 Adults Raise 17 Kids

Written by Beth Greenfield

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<https://www.yahoo.com/parenting>

It's 8:30 a.m. on a Wednesday and one of the calmest school mornings I've ever witnessed: Anya, 6, is practicing the piano with impressive focus. She's wearing a pink-and-lavender flowered dress and what appears to be an ever-present sparkly black scarf tied around her head (shaved during a recent lice breakout, though she did get her ears pierced out of the bargain). She pecks out a one-fingered version of "Do-Re-Mi" as mom Summer putters around in the adjacent kitchen and calls out instructions — "C! D! E!" — whenever she hears her get stuck.

Shortly after, her pal Finley, 3½, tumbles in with his dad, River. Both father and son have long, tangled hair and sleepy smiles. River nods at Summer, but they don't speak — it's too early and they've grown accustomed to the unique ease they have with each other, not family or roommates but something in between, sharing bathrooms and pots and pans and even child-rearing duties. They're part of the same "small living group" in this sprawling, wood-beamed house at [Twin Oaks](#), a 48-year-old commune in rural Virginia, where an ever shifting number of residents (averaging 100) live and work and raise a passel of kids (currently 17).

"Come on, Anya, time to go to school," Summer says, and the kids dart outside with parents in tow, strolling down a gentle, grassy slope to make the 30-second skip-hop to Unicorn School, the homeschool gathering place for the youngest of the Twin Oaks children. There's a wide yard filled with a jumble of tricycles and Hula-Hoops and a homemade, wooden swing set, all edged by thick woods. The school itself, one of about a dozen buildings scattered around the commune's 500 acres, is a spare, two-story house. It's outfitted with children's artwork and rundown furniture (including an old mattress for "the jumping room") and a youth commissary, or "commie," that's like a well-stocked consignment shop, but one where everything's free, passed from older kids to younger until skirts or tees or pants are threadbare.

All the commune's buildings have names, and this one is Degania — a shout-out to the first-ever kibbutz, an Israeli system of communal living that influenced the founders here. All of the commune's children used to live in Degania together, actually — part of the now-defunct program, based upon the behaviorist philosophy of [psychologist B.F. Skinner](#), which claimed that kids who were removed from their parents to be raised by trained adults turned out better. But that Twin Oaks social experiment imploded in the late '90s, after several moms and dads protested. "We got the stake out and drove it through the heart of [that]," is how Keenan, a

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redheaded father of two teenage boys who has lived here for 30 years, describes its demise.

But much of Skinner's legacy still thrives here, as his classic utopian novel "[Walden Two](#)" was the blueprint used by Twin Oaks' founders in 1967. Today, the intentional community (the currently preferred term for "commune") remains very much a place that's egalitarian, feminist, collaborative, loving, and self-sustaining, with everyone required to put in about 40 hours of labor weekly. This can be done by cooking or cleaning in the communal kitchen, milking cows in the dairy, chopping firewood, tending the 3.5 acres of organic vegetable gardens (which feeds the community), doing mountains of laundry, repairing bikes or any of the 17 shared cars and trucks, operating the main office, or doing a variety of jobs related to several Twin Oaks business ventures, from large-scale [tofu production](#) to the weaving of rope hammocks for commercial sale. Everyone gets a modest monthly allowance of \$103 each.

Community members can also earn their keep in another highly esteemed way that can feel downright revolutionary to outsiders: by caring for one of the commune's 17 children, either as that kid's mom or dad or as his or her "primary," the term given to adult mentors who have prescribed times with specific children.

"In our Twin Oaks society, it counts as work to take care of kids — as much as any other work," says Keenan, who was raised in Thailand by his [CIA employee turned whistleblower father](#); he studied business and was on a career track but moved to the commune after a brief visit during college.

He continues, "It's not like we've come up with this scientifically evolved program to create the utopian child. We don't have that — just really common sense: We put a lot of resources into the kids. The adults are not stressed out or struggling. We don't have people who are pregnant and stuck with a couple of kids and are miserable, or even really well-off parents who have gobs of money but no time to focus on their kids, with a nanny who does not feel very empowered. So that's not rocket science. But it is something we do well."

It's not perfect, of course. Kids can feel lonely or isolated due to not having enough peers, and some parents are troubled by the lack of racial diversity here, just for starters.

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But there are still plenty more ways Twin Oaks does right by its youngest residents: with intense communal support among parents; opportunities for the childless to form close relationships with kids; fairly seamless co-parenting arrangements following breakups; a refreshing openness regarding the fluidity of gender and sexuality; and a striking absence of the so-called “mommy wars.” Perhaps most impressively, though, is the enviable reality of an organic work-life balance.

It all adds up to something most parents yearn for but few find: a true village, in that it-takes-a-village sort of way. And while plenty of outsiders looking in might simply see a bunch of wacky, tofu-making hippies who have dropped out of society, it’s a perspective that doesn’t much concern folks here.

“Reading the news — shootings in schools, violence at universities — I think a lot of us feel like what we’re doing is reasonable,” Keenan says, “and the *rest* of the world is crazy.”

Arriving at the Twin Oaks compound inspires instant calm. Driving up the dirt entryway, at least in the springtime, takes you alongside sprawling acres of freshly tilled organic farmlands and blooming gardens. There’s a dairy with roaming Dutch Belted cows, shady canopies of pine and oak trees (many strung with the signature wide, rope hammocks woven by residents here), and clusters of blooming daffodils. The main sounds are those of rustling trees, chirping birds, and occasional moos and barks, with the dull grinding of tofu-factory machinery in the distance. And then, outside the dining hall — named Zhankoye, or “ZK,” after a 1930s Jewish farm collective in Crimea — there’s music in a range of genres, entertaining folks doing kitchen prep, blasting out the windows along with mingled scents of roasting garlic and baking bread.

Several of the shared houses are just past here, including Kaweah (so-named for a 19th century utopian colony in California). In its grassy expanse of a backyard is where I find Kathryn, a pixie-ish 38, who fell quickly in love with what she considers the sanity of Twin Oaks. Raised in the Florida suburbs, she had been living in cooperative housing in Boston as a chemistry grad student.

“I knew this was the way I wanted to live — I wanted to live around people, I wanted to share things,” she explains, perched at a picnic table in the April sun. “So I started looking for community, one that was stable and established, income-sharing, and something where you didn’t have to have a lot of money [to begin living there]. I felt like I’d have a social life here, and it just was a fit.” She moved in 11 years ago and entered into a relationship with a man almost

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immediately. In 2011, after putting in for and receiving a pregnancy approval from the community — mainly a formality meant to keep resources in check — they had a son, Linus, who's 4. Kathryn can't imagine raising him anywhere else.

“From day one, there's been so much ancillary support outside the nuclear unit,” she says. “The house is set up for kids, the infrastructure is there — I didn't have to buy toys or clothes. Breastfeeding is the norm, with no feeling like you had to cover up and hide or any of that. I didn't pump, as our labor system is such that every set of parents has a budget of hours to spend on caring for their child.” Kathryn's main job here, as a book indexer (another Twin Oaks cottage industry), was cut in half after Linus was born, and has slowly gone back up over time.

Then there's the feeling of family that Twin Oaks provides. “[Neighbor] Finley is like a built-in brother with a different dad, and there's no sibling rivalry,” she says. “I feel very protected here, very safe. I never worry when my son is out of sight. There are no locked doors — he doesn't understand the concept very much, that when we go visit family [elsewhere] how you actually can't just walk into other people's houses. Here you can walk in, open their refrigerator, make yourself a snack. Any house here is a public building, owned by all of us.”

An unexpected twist for Kathryn came recently, when she and her partner split after nine years together. They're attempting to co-parent peacefully. But breakups here can be grueling, due to what Twin Oaks co-founder [Kat Kinkade](#) dubbed the “in-your-face phenomenon” in her book about the commune's early years, “[Is It Utopia Yet?](#)” (Still, wrote Kinkade, who died in 2008, “The parents may be going through private hell, but the child's life remains in many ways much the same as it always was — ‘primary time’ with each parent on separate evenings, playing or learning with the same peer group, probably living in the same quarters as before.”)

As Kathryn explains, “It's not like before I moved here — I had a breakup, a partner moved out, we didn't need to see each other anymore. It's more like high school, except you're grownups, and the stakes are higher.” Even more so for parents who choose to remain at Twin Oaks and carry on separate lives in order to keep life smooth for the kids. “That,” she says, “can lead to feeling trapped.”

She's now involved with someone new — Adder, 27, a math wiz with hipsterish muttonchops, who came here from his parents' home in the Philadelphia suburbs after doing a Web search for “Do hippie communes still exist?” (Many do, in fact — at least 200, according to the [Fellow](#)

[ship for Intentional Community](#)

). Now Adder is one of the main homeschool tutors for the children here, as well as a very active primary, or mentor, in other kids' lives.

"I think that's really good for a kid to be able to have real relationships with adults and interact with them not as a different species," he says, noting that he and Kathryn are trying to conceive a child of their own.

But Adder's attentions are divided in a way that may seem startling to the outside world: He also has another girlfriend — who in turn has her *own* girlfriend, as well as a toddler whom the two women co-parent together.

As it turns out, polyamory — being in a committed relationship with more than one person — is quite normal at Twin Oaks (though the majority of people are monogamous). And everyone here, it seems, takes it in stride — including the kids, say their parents, because it's all they know. Many even count it as a child-rearing bonus.

"I think it makes a parent stronger at communication," Claire, the mom of a 1-year-old named Grace, tells me one day. Claire, more than many at Twin Oaks, delivers beautifully when it comes to the expected, free-flowing hippie image: barefooted, long-haired, joyously mellow, and prone to allowing her milky nipples to slip out of her blouse in between Grace's nursing sessions. "You really have to hype your communication skills to be in a poly relationship," she explains. "And I think that's a great thing to offer your family and your children."

Twin Oaks has a long, strong history of thoughtful non-monogamy. "Any group that settles on monogamy as a norm has to figure out how to defend it," wrote Kinkade back in 1972, in an earlier book about the community's history. "Without a heavy Puritan religious bias, this is very difficult."

Today, that tradition continues — minus, many here agree, any confusion for the kids. Part of that is because every adult resident has his or her own bedroom, married or partnered or not, as a way to maintain a semblance of privacy within the context of everything else being shared.

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As Angelica, a Brooklyn, N.Y., native who has no children of her own but is an active primary to several kids, tells me, “It’s not like parents are always sleeping in the same room every night.”

Every parent I speak with is quite open about his or her various permutations of non-monogamy. Summer and Purl are among the minority of couples who have legally married, for example, but they’re also polyamorous, and Summer — who landed at Twin Oaks after a rather privileged, conventional life in Connecticut, boarding school, and a brief stint at Oberlin College — has had a boyfriend for several years.

“Anya knows he is my boyfriend, someone special to me,” Summer says about her daughter’s understanding. “I don’t think I ever need to sit down and have a talk with her, like, ‘This is what this is,’ because this is just what it is.”

Summer is not starry-eyed, though, and admits she has concerns about Anya. “I think that she is more social than Twin Oaks gives her. I think she wants to be around more kids her age, especially more girls her age, which there aren’t any right now,” she says. If her daughter ever became adamant about attending public school, she says she’d be willing to give it a try. For now, they’re going to enroll her in a local Girl Scout troop in the fall, and they’re considering a summer gymnastics course, though fees and transportation issues will make it difficult.

Studies about children reared in unconventional, communal settings are rare, so rare that the go-to expert on the topic appears to be Daniel Greenberg, a sustainable community advisor who studied children in intentional communities for his doctoral dissertation at the University of Minnesota in the 1990s. Still, he tells Yahoo Parenting, “I think the conclusions mostly still apply, as they are pretty general.”

Though the impact of non-monogamy on children is not specifically addressed in [his research](#), for which he visited 25 communities and surveyed 170 from afar, breakups were considered. “Divorce, although never pleasant, tends to be a much smoother and less jarring process for both parents and children within ICs,” he wrote. Among the positives he observed for kids being reared in community were the many opportunities for informal learning experiences — regarding leadership, negotiation, conflict resolution, voting, financial planning, meditation, composting, cooking, recycling, auto repair, gardening, and more. That, he found, built strong cross-generational friendships and verbal, confident, and mature children. It all seemed true

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enough to me while observing the kids at Twin Oaks — whether playing whiffle ball or being tutored by primaries, sizing up new guests, or settling in to plates of fresh vegetables with their parents in the dining hall.

One thing parents and nonparents alike are grappling with here lately is the question of how to transition kids who have grown up here and want to stay as adults. The labor expectations for adults are far higher than they are for older children, so it can be a difficult adjustment. Also, while some residents believe that kids who grow up here should automatically be able to be adult members, others think they should go through the formal application process — which consists of making their case, a trial period, and succumbing to interviews — just like anyone else.

Keenan's son Rowan, 19, has spent his entire life in Twin Oaks, and he's not sure where he'll wind up. His half-brother, Arlo, recently made the decision to stay and has settled into a separate house in the community. Keenan as well as mom Kristen, who runs the Unicorn School, have been encouraging Rowan to explore the world, and he's recently started taking some classes at a nearby community college.

"I think I'm going to keep on doing that and get a degree and try to move out and do something in the world," says Rowan, who is warm and soft-spoken and perpetually barefooted. He spent much of his formative years building houses and other buildings all over the property with his father and brother. Sometimes he was bored. Other times he was sad when people he had grown close to moved away. "I've never really lived outside of Twin Oaks, but I feel like it's a good thing to do, taking on responsibility." He's unsure of what he'd want to do, although he has an interest in computer programming. He then adds, in a quiet voice, "I think my dad sort of wants me to stay here."

Most kids reared here seem to move on. One who left as a teen is now held up by some as a sort of poster child for successful Twin Oaks child rearing: [Devon Sproule](#), 33, a musician who is particularly well-known in Europe, and who was the first child to be raised to adulthood in the community. "If she is the model, if she's the template of how we raise kids at Twin Oaks — that they can discover an artistic passion and can make a career out of it and is still doing it 15 years later — that's pretty good," Keenan points out to me.

When I contact Sproule by email after my visit, she recalls for me her earliest memories of living in Degania as part of the early childhood program. And she enumerates the various

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qualities she gained during her years in the community, which her father has been a part of for more than 30 years. “I think I can communicate well with different kinds of people as a result of growing up at Twin Oaks,” says Sproule, whose singing voice is ethereal and wise. “I’m good at sharing, but I’m also a bit of a pack rat, so maybe that’s from not having as many things of my own growing up? I’m comfortable living on little money, though. And I generally feel safe in the world and trusting of people.”

Mostly, though, her communal childhood has instilled within her an unshakeable peacefulness. “Growing up at Twin Oaks, you’re surrounded by people whose pace of life is generally a bit slower than ‘outside’ life. There’s just a little more time there, and people are more relaxed, a little happier. It’s a rich and nurturing atmosphere, full of people who have time to talk to you and are generally in good moods,” she says. “So imagine growing up in that.”