“Subculture” is a complex concept that is difficult to define without first looking at the meaning of “culture.” Culture refers to people who are bound by a number of shared traits, such as values, goals, practices and attitudes. Subcultures consist of individuals who not only belong to a larger culture, but share attributes distinguishing them from their overall community.

As you may have guessed, Bellingham has its own culture and Bellinghamsters share common features that make up the skeleton of the ‘Ham’s distinct scene. Just to name a few well-known traits: people living in Bellingham are open-minded, prepared for the rain and likely to respond if a stranger says “hey” on the street.

This issue’s theme, “Slice of the ‘Ham,” looks at the smaller scenes or subcultures existing within the Bellingham culture. Some of the subcultures discussed include people united by common practices, such as the nudist and Dumpster diving subcultures. Others, such as the Lummi Nation and queer subcultures, include individuals bound by shared values and attitudes.

No matter what common ground they stand on, this issue is all about the subcultures, or “slices,” of the ‘Ham.

Thanks for reading,
In a dark alley just blocks from downtown Bellingham, people are gathering. Some chain their bicycles to poles, others slam car doors shut, but all follow painted signs hanging from a chain-link fence. Wind sweeps up the alley and gives the night air a bitter chill. The group hurries toward a warehouse with a sign perched out front that reads, “Welcome to the Cirque Lab.”

Escaping from the cold, the people move inside and crowd together in a small room. Patchwork quilts, rainbow blankets and multicolored pillows decorate the cement floor. Children gather on the textiles and sit cross-legged in front of a plywood stage, which rests on milk crates. Every chair is filled. Those without a seat lean against walls or wooden beams jutting down from the ceiling.

At one point, the colorful space was empty with frigid cement walls and boarded up windows. Today, the multi-purpose warehouse is home to a unique group of performers, the Bellingham Circus Guild. The guild transformed the space into the Cirque Lab for practice and performance.

Maintaining the Cirque Lab is only one objective for the guild—a distinct Bellingham subculture of circus artists. The guild also hopes to create a sustainable group of performers in Whatcom County. Unfortunately, maintaining local circus artists can be difficult when performers migrate to bigger cities, like Seattle or Portland, in order to develop their skills as professional artists. These cities can offer artists more support and a bigger paycheck at times.

Richard Hartnell, 26, is a guild member who is working to sustain the local performing arts scene. “There are a lot of circus performers in town interested in setting up the guild as a means for people to become professional artists,” Hartnell says.

In Bellingham, performers often struggle to earn a living, especially when the guild depends on their support. Each month, members are required to contribute $75 to help pay for rent and other expenses. Without a steady income from the circus, most artists are forced to maintain jobs outside of performance. “We are all shucking an uncomfortable amount of money into this space because we want it to continue to exist,” Hartnell says.

In the Cirque Lab, tonight’s show is about to start. A woman wearing a black dress and stockings jumps onto the stage. Her name is Becky Renfrow and she is the host for the evening. Renfrow spends the night introducing acts. Mid-way through the show, she motions to a table resting along one side of the room. Behind it stands Hartnell, one of the sound technicians for the night. Renfrow introduces Hartnell’s act as one that will defy gravity.

Leaving his post for a few minutes, Hartnell takes to the stage to perform. He is a contact juggler. Instead of throwing objects into the air and catching them, a ball travels along his arms and upper body. When he is done performing, Hartnell returns to his spot to continue working the sound for the show.

He says he got serious about contact juggling after meeting with a group of performers at Summer Meltdown, a festival held annually in Darrington, Wash. “I’m part of a school of contact juggling that advocates first learning a particularly difficult trick,” Hartnell says. “It’s called a butterfly.”

He reaches down at his side and pulls an object wrapped in...
In order to keep performers who are unable to afford monthly dues, guild members are trying to construct a work-trade program. The program would allow interested participants to work a certain number of hours in the Cirque Lab as a monthly payment. The program is not feasible at this time because the guild cannot afford to cut costs for members. The guild will have to find alternative sources of money to help maintain the Cirque Lab before the program will work, Hartnell says.

For Hartnell and other members of the guild, the circus offers a space to try something new without worrying about skill level. If he gets bored with juggling club, which meets every Monday in the Cirque Lab, he might try something different, Hartnell says.

For Western junior Alissa French, trying different acrobatic moves led her to be interested in the circus.

“I went to the circus, and I realized that there were so many different things and I could do with my body that I hadn’t learned because they weren’t regulation gymnastics,” French says.

French practiced competitive gymnastics for 10 years. But when she transferred to Western, she found herself without a gymnastics team and a place to practice. French says she started the Acro Club as a way to fill the needs of herself and other gymnasts.

“It was very successful at first,” French says. “But it was hard to plan ahead for.”

Without an adequate indoor space, the Acro Club had to meet on the lawn in front of Western’s Old Main. The grass provided a soft surface, which was necessary for practicing different tumbling moves.

In most cases, the weather determined whether or not practices took place. French says having to wait until the morning of the meeting to find out if it would rain made it difficult to keep attendance up.

“In Bellingham, it was hard to find a lot of sunny days,” French says. “People couldn’t plan ahead for it.”

With groups like the Acro Club falling apart because of the lack of practice space, maintaining the Cirque Lab is becoming more important for the guild, French says. She was invited to check out the lab after guild members attended an Acro Club meeting and told her about the space.

She says she enjoyed the circus, but found it hard to maintain the time commitment and pay member’s dues. When classes began in the fall of 2008, she decided to leave the guild to focus on school, she says.

In order to keep performers who are unable to afford monthly dues, guild members are trying to construct a work-trade program. The program would allow interested participants to work a certain number of hours in the Cirque Lab as a monthly payment. The program is not feasible at this time because the guild cannot afford to cut costs for members. The guild will have to find alternative sources of money to help maintain the Cirque Lab before the program will work, Hartnell says.

For Hartnell, this means devoting time to developing an upcoming show at the Black Porch Alley, which is located where the Callaloo used to be. Dinner and Delight is designed to be a two-hour variety show featuring performances by members of the guild. The show is currently scheduled to start in March and run through May, with shows happening the second Thursday of every month.

“That’s the funny paradox about the circus,” Hartnell says. “To most people, the circus just shows up and you go see the show, and that’s it. You don’t realize that these are actually human beings that live their lives within this circus scene.”

Events such as Dinner and Delight may be a solution to the guild’s financial needs. Hartnell hopes the performances will draw large enough crowds to continue on a regular basis.

“No one really knows where we are going,” Hartnell says. “But we are expanding and figuring out how to maintain this.”

Back in the Cirque Lab, Vautreville is coming to an end, but the audience is hoping for one last performance. Renfrow introduces the crowd to Ukoya Masitin and beckons her onto the stage. Renfrow tells the audience that Masitin is one of the founders of Ulli Productions, the company that laid the foundation for the guild.

With cheers and applause, Masitin reluctantly stands up from her seat in the crowd. She pulls a piece of purple silk down from the wooden beams hanging above the stage. With one swift movement, she begins to climb the fabric. She twists and wraps the silk around her body. Her movements are simple and smooth but planned to perfection. Each has its own purpose.

She pulls her way to the top of the silk. Her body hangs in the air, several feet above the cement floor. The purple fabric wraps around her hips and ankles. Now she is able to extend her arms and legs and the textile holds her like a harness.

Then with a simple flick of her foot, her ankle comes unhooked. She bundles toward the ground, her body flipping and turning. With each tumble, another yard of the purple silk is set free. In perfect grace and form, her slender body stops just before hitting the ground. The audience gasps, then bursts into cheers.
“You have to learn to become a family again.”
A group of adventurers carefully descend the stairs of the temple of Shar, the evil goddess of darkness. Stopping just short of a pit, they manage to rig a makeshift bridge across and open the door into the inner sanctum where they are immediately attacked by four cultists and two iron dogs.

"The iron dog leaps at your throat," says Travis Gann, the Dungeon Master for the night, as he rolls a 20-sided die. "It ends up missing your throat but gnawing on your shoulder for five damage."

Bellingham resident Bruce Bogle, the player behind the attacked character, shrugs the damage off with a smile. "I'm gonna stab this guy in front of me because he's a jerk," Bogle says, rolling the die, which lands on a 20. "Ooh, a crit."

In the early '80s and '90s, Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) was often seen by the media and American society as a dangerous and subversive game. The game was first made out to be a satanic practice that was bringing American youth to devil worship, says Karl Smith, an officer of Bellingham Society of Roleplayers.

In the '90s, this image slowly changed, but a new stigma was taking its place. D&D was instead the game of social rejects, a subculture of people who squatted in their mothers' basement feasting on Cheetos and Mountain Dew, Smith says.

However, this stigma is starting to fade away because of the influence of online games such as World of Warcraft (WoW) that intend to simulate the feel of games like D&D, Smith says. As of January, WoW has more than 11 million users worldwide and focuses primarily on combat, Smith says. This affected the design for 4th edition, the newest D&D set of rules released in May 2008.

For some longtime D&D players in Bellingham, the change in their subculture is not necessarily a bad thing. "In playing Dungeons and Dragons, I like a lot of the technical combat scenarios more," says Bogle, who has played D&D for more than 20 years. "There tends to be more of that in 4th edition."

Bogle and Gann play with the Role-Playing Game Association (RPGA), a national organization with a chapter in Bellingham. RPGA allows players to bring their characters anywhere and uses 4th edition exclusively.

The Bellingham chapter of RPGA tends to have about eight to 15 players a night, while the Bellingham Society of Roleplayers range from about five to 10—numbers which showcase local D&D enthusiasm despite 4th edition.

While it is possible the subculture itself will change, the core of the game remains the same. D&D is still a way for people to come together, delve into dungeons and slay dragons.

"He promised us death and destruction and, well, he failed to deliver," Bogle says, as the party finishes cutting their way through the iron dogs and guards, confronting the priestess of Shar.

"I didn't promise you death and destruction," Gann says, moments before the party falls upon the priestess. The party slays the priestess and takes her treasure, ending another local D&D match.

Derek Pospsil sorts his dice prior to playing Dungeons & Dragons. Each polyhedral die has a different function during gameplay, such as attacking, defending, casting spells and using certain weapons.

"[D&D] has the standard dwarves under their mountains, elves in their woods and a fantasy setting," Gann says. "I see a lot of people playing elven rangers, deserves clad in plate mail. You see a lot of those iconic type of characters, but you have the occasional rebel."
It’s 11 o’clock on a Wednesday night. The icy January fog consumes Bellingham, covering rooftops, softening traffic sounds and crystallizing every surface outside.

Western sophomores Ciaran Seward, Christina Snyder and junior Alex shiver as Snyder scrapes a hole in the ice on her windshield just large enough to see through.

Bundled up in warm jackets and outfitted with canvas grocery bags and flashlights, the trio drives out of the York Neighborhood onto Ellis Street. Their destination has not been fully determined, but their task is clear.

The conversation stays casual while radio beats play in the background. The roads are clear and the only pedestrian in sight is a man bundled up in a long trench coat.

Seward, Snyder and Alex are on a quest to find dinner ingredients.

They plan to collect food from grocery stores—but not from their shelves. Instead, these students are finding food in Dumpsters behind local grocery stores, or in other words, “Dumpster diving.”

“Ok, turn your lights off,” Seward says to Snyder as they pull into the first parking lot of a grocery store near the letter street neighborhood.

They approach the grocery store’s Dumpster on the side of the building while Alex scans the surroundings for any unwelcoming people.

“If you think that is a cop?” Alex asks as he spots a white Ford across the street.

Snyder drives away from the Dumpster to get a closer look at the car. The word “SHERIFF” is painted on the vehicle in gold capital letters.

Dumpster diving is a new trend in collecting food, especially in the Seattle area. The trend expanded from freeganism, which is an alternative lifestyle that seeks to distance individuals from the capitalist economy as much as possible. Freegans believe businesses have used unethical methods to gain profits, which motivates them to find and utilize free resources in the community.

According to the Freegan.info Web site, Freegans wish to freely share resources instead of gaining them from businesses, which they view as corrupt. In particular, freegans want to reduce waste, limit consumption, save money, strengthen communities and opt out of the cycle of working for corporations they consider to be socially irresponsible. Through methods such as Dumpster diving, freegans are attempting to live sustainably and reduce contribution to the abuse of humans, animals and the earth.

Seward and Alex say they are not attempting to live a completely freegan lifestyle, but they Dumpster dive in response to American over-consumption and the waste of decent food materials. Due to Federal Drug Administration expiration dates, grocery stores are forced to dispose of food before it is purchased, perpetuating the cycle of waste.

Although the trio’s Dumpster diving hunts are usually successful, Alex and Seward sometimes worry about getting caught in Dumpsters.

“If a Dumpster belongs to a business, it is considered private property,” Seward says.

The phrase “one man’s trash is another man’s treasure” has become a guiding principle for a group of Western students: sophomores Ciaran Seward, Christina Snyder and junior Alex.

The students participate in “Dumpster diving,” a subculture within the Bellingham community consisting of people willing to jump into local Dumpsters to find unwanted food and objects. Since Dumpster diving is illegal in Whatcom County, these divers risk their reputation and well-being for what they believe in.

“Last name withheld because Dumpster diving is illegal.”

Story by Christine Karambelas
Photos by Mark Malijan

Alex plunges into a Dumpster on Jan. 30, 2009. The variety of items found in Dumpsters ranges from food to household products.
property, which makes Dumpster diving illegal, Alex says.

"Usually store owners are pretty chill about asking us to leave (a Dumpster)," Alex says. "Sometimes they still let us to continue (to Dumpster dive). I've only had to deal with the cops once, who just asked us to leave."

Mark Young, a Bellingham police officer from the Crime Prevention Unit, says he does not see Dumpster diving as much of an issue in Bellingham.

When people take recyclable goods such as bottles and cans from Dumpsters, they are taking property from the local recycling company, which makes a profit from recycling those products, Young says. So, if divers get caught taking recyclables, they could be charged with a misdemeanor, he says.

Dumpster diving behind stores, however, is considered trespassing and the person could be asked to leave the property, Young says. Repeat violators can be arrested if they return to a property after being asked by police to leave.

"We don't dictate procedure policies of the stores," Young says. "But if a store calls [about] someone in their Dumpster, we are going to respond."

On this Wednesday night, however, the Sheriff does not interfere.

Still in search of food, the divers continue their journey, this time heading to a local business that is known to throw out a lot of produce.

"Fruit, watermelon, powdered sugar. Fruit, watermelon, powdered sugar…," Seward chants in hopes of finding these ingredients for a special recipe.

In a dark loading zone behind a store, the trio find their next targets – two small Dumpsters. This store in particular, which is known among divers for its produce, has become a popular diving location. As a result, the owner of the Dumpsters has been on the watch for divers.

"We got to be quiet and quick with this one," Seward says.

After the car is turned off and left facing the street for a quick get-away, the divers step out with flashlights and bags in hand, leaving the doors open to reduce any noise. Alex opens the first Dumpster lid from underneath a bar that latches it closed. After looking inside and not seeing anything of interest, the divers proceed to the second Dumpster.

The opening of the lid releases a sour, rotten citrus smell that burns the nose. Inside, a mound of bean sprouts and carrot peelings cover all sides of the walls. As Snydor holds a flashlight into the Dumpster, the divers see lemons, onions and apples. Seward jumps in, sinking into the confetti-like shreds of produce.

"I need to make it my goal to sleep in a Dumpster," Seward says as she collects lemons for what she hopes to make into lemon desserts.

"It's important to leave (food) for other people," Alex says. "Just take what you need."

After Seward jumps out of the Dumpster, Alex closes the lid. He says it is crucial to leave Dumpsters the way they were found, otherwise divers run a risk of upsetting businesses, who might start locking lids.

The divers visit three other Dumpster locations in the downtown area that night. They find food in one of the locations – multiple sealed bags of tortillas, still in good condition. The tortillas were thrown away because the expiration date was from the day before they were found.

The crew runs into another Dumpster diving posse, who have a bicycle with a baby trailer full of goods found from diving. They trade some packages of tortillas for lemons and announce a community feast that will be hosted later in the week.

"In this culture, we have so [many] to feed," Alex says. "[Dumpster diving] is sustainable because we obtain what is present."

Seward says they often find more than enough food, and this is why Alex and her friends also host gatherings to feast on what they find during Dumpster diving.

Seward’s roommate and Western sophomore Jesse Chapelle says a common meal of choice in the house is “mush,” which includes eggs, hashbrowns and other foods found in Dumpsters or bought from stores.

Western junior Hallie Sloan, another one of Seward’s roommates, says through Dumpster diving, their house of five roommates has been able to save money. As a household, they spend $120 per week on groceries, making it easier for each of them to pay tuition and rent.

"There’s so much to go around, and we are just trying to show that," Alex says.

Sloan says although the house gets most of its food from Dumpster diving, they have also found reusable products.

"I want to go to [a drug store] after Christmas where I found wrapping paper still in the seal," Sloan says.

Chapelle says people in the house continue to make their findings last as best as they can, processing, drying and fermenting foods to make products such as kimchi, cheese, yogurt and beer.

"If you throw something out, you don’t feel bad about it because it would have already gone into a landfill," Chapelle says.

Alex says they also give away the food they find and do not need.

"There’s so much to go around, and we are just trying to show that," Alex says.

The group plans to continue Dumpster diving on a weekly basis, recording what is collected from each location. They hope to find consistent treasure out of Dumpsters, which means this subculture will continue to thrive – sheriff or no sheriff.
Due to recent events, the Bellingham gay community faces new challenges in its on-going fight for equal rights.

"It brought tears to my eyes, literally," Foley says, "I felt like I was back in the '60s." At the Seattle protest, people of all ages were walking in the streets in chants, Foley says he felt like he could have run a marathon. The rush of adrenaline and feeling of being part of something bigger was what he wanted to bring to Western and Bellingham's gay subculture.

"We need an outlet for everyone to express their anger, to express their need for equality," he says. "You can do it. You can keep fighting, and eventually we will have equality."

The first Queers and Allies for Activism event, possibly a demonstration in Red Square, is in the planning stages. Foley will be sending out invitations to the nearly 200 members on the club's Facebook page. Whenever it does happen, even if only half the members show up, Foley will have a lot of hands to shake.

FIGHTING STORY by Amanda Winters
PHOTOS by Damon Call

Western freshman Isaac Bond, also known as Lillian Cumterbull, calls up the next participant during a Drag Show Karaoke night at Western's Underground Coffeehouse on Feb. 2, 2009.

Fighting

"I think activism is coming back because people are being shaken.

Story by Amanda Winters
Photos by Damon Call

"I'll shake your hand," Western junior Josh Foley says to the man next to him as he pours apple juice into a red plastic cup. "I'm a hand-shaker."

Foley, coordinator of the new Western club Queers and Allies for Activism, sets down the jug of juice and reaches out with his right hand, "What's your name?"

Tonight on the fourth floor of the Viking Union is the Queer Summit – a chance for Western clubs in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community to meet and greet during a time when alliances matter more than ever.

Due to recent events, the Bellingham gay community faces new challenges in its on-going fight for equal rights. In January, 11 gay bars in Seattle received threatening, anonymous letters. The letters said bar patrons would be poisoned by ricin, a deadly, undetectable poison that can be slipped into customers' drinks. Just months before, gay bars in Seattle were brutally harassed.

Due to recent events, the club Queers and Allies for Activism was planning to do so in public until the principal sat him down the day before the first school assembly.

"He said, 'I heard a rumor that you may have or may be planning to do something,'" Foley recalls. Despite the warning from his principle, Foley came out publicly and established a presence as no one had before him. Queers and Allies for Activism will similarly establish a presence and won't let up until the world takes notice and the entire gay community including poetry nights, ice cream socials and the annual drag show, which was held Feb. 26 this year. The events are designed to create a safe place for gay students and a way for them to reach out into the community. The Queer Summit is an event she uses to facilitate the outreach process.

In his seat at one of the many white tables at the Queer Summit, Foley-shakes his vision for the club. With gesturing hands, he explains his desire to demand public attention for the club, which would allow members to focus on gay rights issues.

"We need them to know we're here," he says, banging his fist down on the table. As a gay person who came out of the closet during high school in conservative Colfax, Wash., Foley has already established himself as a leader and advocate for gay rights. He had already "come out" on his MySpace page and was planning to do so in public until the principal sat him down the day before the first school assembly.

"He said, "I heard a rumor that you may have or may be planning to do something' and I wanted to tell you I think it's a bad idea because I don't know how well the school could protect you if someone wanted to do something," Foley recalls.

Despite the warning from his principle, Foley came out publicly and established a presence as no one had before him. Queers and Allies for Activism will similarly establish a presence and won't let up until the world takes notice and gives the queer community their rights, he says.

Foley went to the Prop 8 protest in Seattle last November. A similar protest was held in Bellingham with a turnout of several hundred.

"I'm at a loss for words for how unbelievable [the protest] was," he says. "It think it's because it was such a welcoming atmosphere with everyone together, and we are all mad about the same thing and we all want to make change. I felt like I was back in the '60s."

At the Seattle protest, people of all ages were walking down the streets. Protesters brought their families and Foley recalls seeing a child holding a sign that read "I love my gay parents."

"It brought tears to my eyes, literally," Foley says, blinking with moistened eyes behind his thick-black framed glasses. After marching down Seattle's streets and leading thousands of protestors in chants, Foley says he felt like he could have run a marathon. The rush of adrenaline and feeling of being part of something bigger was what he wanted to bring to Western and Bellingham's gay subculture.

"We need an outlet for everyone to express their anger, to express their need for equality," he says. "You can do it. You can keep fighting, and eventually we will have equality."

"I think activism is coming back because people are being shaken.

Story by Amanda Winters
Photos by Damon Call

Western freshman Isaac Bond, also known as Lillian Cumterbull, calls up the next participant during a Drag Show Karaoke night at Western's Underground Coffeehouse on Feb. 2, 2009.

Fighting

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March 2009

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boarders without boundaries

On a Sunday afternoon in early November, the sun is shining. A large, dark blue truck is parked on the hill of Forest and Cedar Park in Bellingham. The truck bed is overflowing with a white, icy substance. The temperature is about 50 degrees and the sky is cloudless.

A group of seven men hop out of the truck and a nearby car filled with snowboarding gear and a large shovel. One of the men starts unloading the truck bed and shovels the white powder onto the grassy hill to create a man-made slope for doing tricks. Two long wooden frames topped by a flat surface are placed in a line toward the bottom of the hill, followed by more snow shoveled at the base.

Once the creation is complete, a man in black jeans and a green shirt quickly fastens his snowboard bindings and hobbling over to the top of the slope. He hesitates a moment, jumps into the air while rotating his board and descends down the hill. Another boarder follows his lead, this time spinning his board in mid-air after jumping off the rail.

After each run on the roughly 20 to 30 foot man-made slope, the men hop around on their boards to steady themselves enough to unfasten their bindings. Once unbuckled, they walk up the grassy hill to attempt another run.

For Western junior Rhys Logan, building home-made jumps with shaved ice in local parks was a typical weekend activity until Mount Baker ski area opened mid-December. Before the season started, he posted a video on a Transworld Snowboarding Web site, which shows the snowboarders practicing tricks off their creation as local residents and families watch in awe.

Logan is one of many Bellingham snowboarders using this new method – building jumps beyond Mount Baker due to lack of snow.

The late winter this year pushed opening day at Mount Baker back by more than two weeks from its usual late November opening. What’s more, season passes are now almost $700 – even with a college student discount. That’s nearly a $130 increase since the 2006-2007 season.

Still, the delayed season and high prices have not prevented passionate snowboarders from doing what they love. Rather, season delays have spawned the popularity of a new way to practice tricks and technique, creating a unique Bellingham subculture in the past couple years.

To keep the activity alive before and after snowboarding season, boarders are building terrains in their own backyards and local parks with household objects such as PVC pipe, wood planks and whiteboards, which the boarders cover with shaved ice from local skating rinks. This set up enables the boarders to do front-side and back-side boardslides, 270’s, tail presses and more.

Logan and his friends are doing whatever it takes to keep snowboarding year-round despite the lack of winter weather in Bellingham.

“It’s great to see people take that extra step to board,” Logan says. “It lets you see people who are really into snowboarding.”

The group of year-round snowboarders started meeting at the end of last September as a pre-season activity open to anyone, Logan says. About six to eight boarders would participate every weekend for around five hours.

Story by Sarah Gordon
Photos courtesy of Rhys Logan

Mark Macias does nose presses on a box under the flood lights at Forest and Cedar Park last September. A nose press requires a snowboarder to shift his or her weight all over the nose of the board while leaving the rest of the board lifted off the snow.
Western junior Bart Patitucci, a friend of Logan’s, started the group. “It was just trying to get back on our boards before the season,” Patitucci says. “A lot of people in Bellingham will just go to Baker to ride the mountain and don’t really care about man-made stuff. I like to do all types of snowboarding, so I don’t limit myself to just riding in one place.”

Patitucci and others in the group have built their own jumps and rails downtown and in their backyards over the past couple seasons. This was the first year they tried it in a local park, however.

Before each session, Logan, Patitucci and fellow snowboarders pick up “snow” from the Bellingham Sportsplex. After scraping ice off the rink with the Zamboni, a truck-like vehicle used to smooth the ice rink, the driver dumps the leftover shaved ice in a bin outside the building. Sportsplex employees will often transfer some of the snow into the back of a truck for the group.

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The boarders often leave a yellowish-brown path in the grass where they held their sessions in the park, but neighborhood residents have shown an encouraging attitude. One resident opened her garage and offered a power outlet to the group during night sessions, Logan says.

Other than the occasional bumps and bruises, no one has received serious injuries during the park sessions — they’ve just gotten a little muddy.

“You get really dirty, and it’s pretty funny sometimes,” Logan says. “The snow melts, and there are leaves sticking to you. It’s great for those who are new because if you fall, it’s not that big [of a deal]. You just get mud and leaves all over you.”

WWU Snowboarding Club president and Western senior Casey Desmond says riding around the city and building custom jumps and rails have always been a growing part of the snowboarding culture.

“Whenever it snows, Desmond, who has been snowboarding for 11 years, will ride terrain, or man-made jumps and set ups. Desmond also enjoys building jumps in the backcountry because it provides an experience that boarders can not find in any terrain park.

“It’s a lot more rewarding at the end of the day,” Desmond says. “Creating your own jump could take an hour or a day to build and you feel more self accomplishment. There’s a lot more elements to terrain when you are building them, and that’s more fun than just going to a park.”

After discovering how easy it is to get shaved ice from the Sportsplex, Logan expects that the group will start meeting up again in the spring.

The snowboarders also carpool to Baker despite how expensive season passes have become. Last year, the group went to Baker from November to June, and then to Mount Hood in August, Patitucci says.

“The charity is usually running in April, but I try to snowboard until all the snow is gone,” Patitucci says.

In the beginning, Logan says snowboarding can be tough. He keeps himself motivated by watching professional snowboarding videos, which inspire him. In the end, he says it all comes down to having fun with the activity rather than worrying about getting better right away.

“If you’re having a great time even while you’re falling, you can only get better,” Logan says. “Snowboarding is a means to travel, and it’s a means to meet new people and enjoy life. It will shake things up.”

The Transworld Snowboarding video Logan posted continues with various snowboarders in the group practicing their tricks on their man-made set up. As one boarder attempts what appears to be a back-side 270, he plummets to the ground while dismounting the rail for his 90 degree rotation. His board hits the ground first, sending him into the air, then back down, head first into the mud. He rolls over with a grin on his face and gets back on his board.

NO SHIRT SHOES PROBLEM

Story by Ashley Ventimilla
Photo Illustration by Mark Malijan
Photos by Damon Call

Nobody recognizes Zac Robertson when he shows up on his bicycle for a local gathering that rotates houses in downtown Bellingham. After walking through the front door, bravely peeling off all of his clothing and politely removing his shoes, he is bombarded with greetings from friends. As he waves his clothes up and drops them off by the door, Robertson feels right at home. He passes a circle of drum-tapping people sitting on the living room floor and struts naked toward the kitchen to help make some sushi.

“I started going to sushi night a year or two ago, and for the first year, I wore a loin cloth,” says Robertson, the co-coordinator of Western’s Associated Students for Optional Clothing Club. “Then I just kind of outlawed the loin cloth. I said, ‘Well, is everyone ok if I’m just naked?’ And they all said, ‘Yeah, that would totally push the limits.’

For most people, thinking back to the last time they were nude in public conjures early childhood memories of frolicking naked in a state of youthful bliss. But for Robertson and the rest of Bellingham’s nudist subculture, the earliest years of their lives do not necessarily mark the last time they enjoyed public nudity.

So what is it about being naked that has compelled more than 50,000 people in North America to officially declare themselves nudists? Is it identification with their inner child? Or is it a desire to rebel against societal norms?

According to the American Association for Nudist Recreation (AANR), many people are inspired to become nudists thanks to organizations that foster nudist camaraderie and fellowship. The AANR is an organization representing 50,000 “undressed North Americans,” with 20

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of its 270 nudist clubs, resorts and affiliates located in Washington. Although Robertson encourages others to practice nudity in organized settings, exposing his own skin is about extending his senses.

“When I go hiking, I don’t feel like my eyes are open until my clothes are off,” Robertson says. “My senses are not as awake until I include my skin as an organ of sense.”

Robertson first began practicing public nudity about a year ago in social, clothed settings such as parties and on hiking trails. He says the experience was unnerving but inspiring.

“Bellingham is a place where people question things,” Robertson says. “There are many groups of people in Bellingham with wonderful intentions educating each other. There’s an overall culture of sharing things that are beyond the mainstream, and we want to be part of that.”

Eisme Dutcher, founder of Western’s Students for Optional Clothing, says nudist friends inspired her to begin practicing a clothing-optional lifestyle. All people are made of the same physical parts, she says, and no one should be shocked by a naked person.

“People first decide to experience the act of being unclothed around other people, they experience nervousness, excitement, fright – and then release and awe for how mundane and natural it actually is,” she says.

Robertson says the club strives to transcend the societal implications of sexualized nudity to provide an atmosphere where people can be more comfortable with their own body image. Recently, she and 12 other practicing nudists gathered together in a tiny living room to relax naked under soft blankets while reading stories aloud.

“When people first decide to experience the act of being unclothed around other people, they experience nervousness, excitement, fright – and then release and awe for how mundane and natural it actually is,” Robertson says. Although the club has only five official members so far, Dutcher says as many as 15 people at a time have attended events organized by the club. She says the club plans to organize more nude events such as potlucks and game, story and craft nights.

Meanwhile, the clothing optional movement has recently encountered regional backlash. In July 2008, 57 bicyclists rode naked through Seattle. Three of the bicyclists were arrested despite the Seattle Naked Bike Ride event’s traditional public acceptance since 2003.

Seattle Parks and Recreation Superintendent Tim Gallagher says local citizens complained that the participants’ nudity was obscene, which led police and the city’s parks department to address potentially banning public nudity. As of last November however, Seattle officials refused to ban non-offensive public nudity.

“The implicit assumption in saying that [nudity] is obscene is that there is something wrong with our bodies and that we all have something to hide,” Dutcher says. Gallagher says Washington has problematic nude policy because public nudity is only illegal if someone feels offended and complains about it.

Washington’s nude policy continues to impact local nudist communities such as the Lake Associates Recreation Club (LARC) near Mount Vernon. The LARC, which consists of 115 members, is run by Astrid and her husband Mike King, who own the 40-acre property. Although the couple purchased the property in 1990, the club has existed for decades.

The property’s facilities include campgrounds, hiking areas, a pool, a hot tub and a 5-acre sunning lawn where clothing-optional events take place. The club has also participated in Western’s annual Info Fair in September for the past five years.

“We want to let people know that we’re here, and we’re a good venue for outdoor events,” Astrid King says. “We get welcomed back every year, and it’s always been fun. We have had positive responses from Western students.”

King says she began living a clothing-optional lifestyle because she enjoyed sunbathing nude, but she felt her backyard was confining. After a few years, she became interested in other places where she could enjoy outdoor nudity.

King says LARC not only offers social settings for practicing nudists, it also provides a large amount of property for people wanting to practice outdoor nudity in solitude. She says the club’s members range in age from early twenties to late sixties. Some of the members even bring their grandchil-dren, she says.

King says she has never encountered anyone who reacted negatively to her being a nudist, but she realizes that some people view public nudity negatively.

“We’re not out to offend anyone,” King says. “We want to have the right to be outdoors without our clothes if we choose. We chose this property for a reason, and if we did, there would be a fence. We have ground rules, and rules of conduct that we are pretty strict about.”

According to the LARC Web site, actions such as intimate contact, sexually provocative behavior, intoxication or use of illegal substances and vulgar language are all against club rules. Taking pictures without specific permission is also not allowed.

At a Students for Optional Clothing event, Dutcher adjusts her glasses and peers over them with her clear blue eyes. Clad in nothing but a red scarf and voluminous brown skirt, she awaits Robertson’s next move as they play a card game on the floor with some of their friends.

Robertson adjusts the only attire he has on, a large fishnet cloak, and lays a few cards down in front of him. Glancing around the room at fellow Western students who have joined him for a night of clothing-optional card playing, he scratches his beard appreciatively.

At a Students for Optional Clothing club event, Dutcher can feel free to enjoy themselves unclothed and share good vibes during tactile clothing night on Jan. 29, 2009.
Klipsun is the Lummi word meaning “beautiful sunset.”