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“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.

Hartnell 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...
For Hartnell, this means devoting time to developing an understanding of human beings that live their lives within the circus scene.

"They’re smart. They just need some help [and] need some love," Hillaire says.

A study from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration shows more than 51 percent of Native Americans who are 12 years old and older admit to using illegal drugs such as marijuana and methamphetamine, compared to 20 percent of Asian-Americans and 42 percent of Caucasian-Americans.

The academy houses 17 girls and eight boys from five different tribal backgrounds. The facility opened in September 2008 next door to the K-12 Lummi Nation School to provide

WWU Juggling Club president Aaron Pouket (left) and former Juggling Guild president Colin Topolosi practice hand rotation techniques used in many juggling tricks.
You have to learn to become a family again.*

tribal youth with food, housing, mental health counseling and student programs at no cost. Student programs like mixed martial arts, trips to the YMCA and Lummi cultural classes. Students may live at the academy 365 days a year if they wish, but they must pledge to stay off drugs. Academy Director Matt Magrath says.

Living spaces such as the Lummi Youth Academy are sprouting up across the nation. The academy is modeled after several Native American schools, namely the SBEED Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., and the Santa Fe Indian School in New Mexico.

Hillaire, a former Lummi chairman, launched a war on drugs when he entered office seven years ago. Under Hillaire’s leadership, a full-time drug detective was hired for the Lummi Police Department and surveillance cameras were installed in common drug-trafficking areas.

Before the creation of the academy, struggling Lummi students were sent to Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon. Magrath says one of the challenging aspects of running a successful academy is bringing families back together rather than tearing them apart. Although the students are no longer under their parents’ supervision, academy staff emphasizes rebulding family connections by keeping the academy open for family visits.

“You have to learn to become a family again,” Magrath says.

Students can invite parents and siblings to Sunday dinners, and families are welcome anytime during the students’ stay. Unfortunately, it is rare for parents to visit, Magrath says. “The families are just not stepping up and are not present,” he says.

The academy struggles to retain students because of rules placed on all residents, such as the rule requiring students to receive permission to come and go from the facility. The academy has lost more than a dozen students, as well as five students who enrolled in fall 2008 but never showed up.

“We haven’t made it so compelling that they want to stay [at the academy],” Hillaire says.

Edwards describes herself as the self-declared drama queen of the academy. She moved in fast after finishing treatment at St. Eloy-Chen, a youth drug treatment facility on the reservation. She attributes her former marijuana addiction to her older brothers who introduced her to the drug when she was 8 years old. Edwards has spent most of her life in and out of foster homes where she says she was given freedom to do as she pleased.

“There are people that care about you [at the academy],” Edwards says. “Before at foster homes, I didn’t really feel like they cared about me. Here it’s different – I’m closer to my family, and it’s more cultural.”

Edwards hopes her 15- and 16-year-old brothers will eventually join her at the academy.

“They make fun of me but they tell me that they don’t really mean it,” she says. “They’re actually just proud of me.”

Lewis came to the academy after her cousin recommended she enroll. Before arrival, she was kept busy caring for her mother who uses a wheelchair. But when summer began, Lewis delved into drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana to lift her spirits. If she returns to her mother’s home, she says she will sink back into her old habits.

“It’s kind of dumb now that I look back on it,” Lewis says. “In the back of my mind, I knew it was dumb. My mind was all boggled, and it didn’t really matter at the time. I think I like the natural highs better.”

Now Lewis seeks a different kind of euphoria through running and boxing. She trains three days a week in mixed martial arts and considers boxing or grappling as a future career. Lewis says she wants to be champign of the world.

“You’ll see her on your Wheaties [box] in the morning,” Edwards says.

Lewins looks forward to her first match in Wenatchee this April.

“No way I’m losing my first fight,” she says. “I want bragging rights.”

Lewis and her roommate Gania-Lee Candie-Ridley, nicknamed Broadway, are trying to assemble a Lummi youth council open to all students on the reservation. The council would raise money for college visits and petition the Lummi Tribal Council to make amendments to the Point Elliot Treaty, the 1855 land settlement forcing the Lummi people onto a 20-square-mile reservation, Lewis says.

Nelson Montenegro, an 18-year-old resident of the academy and a senior at Lummi Nation School, is captain and a center offensive lineman for the Lummi Blackhawks football team. During off-seasons, he plays on the school’s basketball, lacrosse and track teams. In his spare time, he is building a computer for his senior project from scratch.

Inside Montenegro’s room, computer parts and small screws are strewn about the floor. A red blanket with a Lummi tribal symbol covers the wall beside his bed. Plastered against the opposite wall is a blow-up picture of himself and his teammates wearing maroon and black school colors during a football game.

Before attending the academy, Montenegro says he lived without rules. The lifestyle led him to deal drugs and lead his older brother’s imprisonment on charges of armed robbery.

“You got to have responsibility, so I’m pretty happy with how it is right now,” he says. “Right now is better than before.”

Montenegro will be the only one of his cousins to graduate high school, and he is determined to pass, he says. Donning a gray and white superhero T-shirt and muddled shoes, Montenegro says he is obsessed with science and hopes to attend Bellingham Technical College in the fall.

Among Montenegro are several other male students who live at the academy. Hillaire says these men experience frustration because they grew up without solid father figures or a stable family.

“They’d be the best dads because they’ve been hurt and they know that hurt,” Hillaire says. “I want to show them the mountaintop.”

Hillaire says he vows to show the height of potential for the young men at the academy.

“As we get more educated and are able to hold on to what’s good about our tribal culture, then I think we’re going to be pretty proud of our people,” Hillaire says. “Then we’re not only survived, but thrived.”

On Thursday nights, students and staff gather for dinner as various sports practices and activities come to an end. At one table, a staff member and student laugh and bicker playfully over which artists are better – 50 Cent or The Beatles. At another table, Edwards busts out a freestyle rap to Montenegro’s beatboxing.

The laid-back, dormitory-like atmosphere gives students the chance to relax and unwind after a busy day. Before tomorrow, they will return to their busy schedules and dreams of success – in a stable environment.
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, "I didn't promise you death and destruction," Gann says, moments before the party falls upon the priestess of Shar. "I didn't promise you death and destruction," Gann says, moments before the party falls upon the priestess. The party stabs the priestess and takes her treasure, ending another local D&D match.

"D&D has the standard dwarves under their mountains, elves in their woods and fantasy setting," Gann says. "You 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.

“Do 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, 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 heading to a local business that is known to throw out a lot of produce, 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.

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As Snyder holds a flashlight into the Dumpster, the divers see 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.

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

The nose. Inside, a mound of bean sprouts and carrot peelings cover all sides of the walls.

As Snyder 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 and Alex continue their journey.

The group plans to continue Dumpster diving on a weekly basis, taking 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.

Alex says the goal of Dumpster diving is not to find food for free, but it is a matter of sustainability.

“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 hold 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.

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

“I went 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.
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 poisonings by ricin, a deadly, undetectable poison that can be slipped into customers’ drinks. Just months before the letter was sent, several gay and transgender students at Washington State University were brutally harassed and attacked.

“Recent events have really brought the community together and made me realize the reason the community was so separate was because they felt safe,” Foley says.

As a gay person growing up in conservative eastern Washington, Foley says he would walk down the street expecting to hear a derogatory comment or have something thrown at him. Because of the risks that came with being alone, gay people in his hometown travelled together.

“Our community was close-knit because we had to be,” he says. “Over here, no one expects [bad things to happen]. But with all the things that have been happening around the country, that has changed a lot.”

The most prominent threat to gay civil rights involves the recent passing of Proposition 8 (Prop 8). Prop 8 is a state constitutional amendment passed in California that bans gay marriage. It was passed in November 2008 just six months after the California State Supreme Court ruled laws preventing same-sex marriage are unconstitutional. After fighting for decades for the right to marry within their own sex, the passing of Prop 8 was a huge step back for the gay community. It was passed by a narrow 5 percent margin.

“I think it’s against the progress that’s been made,” says Western alumnus Robert Ashworth, 53, who has been part of Bellingham’s gay community since the 1970s. “When I was in college, gay marriage was a radical idea and nobody even proposed it, but now, it’s legal in Canada.”

Foley recalls seeing a child holding a sign that read “I love god” and people were being shaken. “I think activism is coming back because people are being shaken.”

“Amber Aldrich, coordinator of Western’s Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Alliance (LGBTA), is one of the people being shaken. As a woman with two mothers who identify as gay, Aldrich says her position as an alliance coordinator is sometimes difficult.

“We can’t get political,” she says. “It’s challenging for me because political is personal.”

Aldrich coordinates events for Western’s 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 space 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 shares 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 come out 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 principal, 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. “I 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 protesters 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.

March 2009
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 hobble 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, 270s, 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.
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 boarders.

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Aside from the strange glances locals give them, Logan and his friends do not receive any negative responses to their snowboarding activities in the park.

“We was surprised with how people embraced it,” Logan says. “We’d get some funny looks sometimes because it would be the end of September, and we’d be driving through town with a truck load of snow in the sunny weather. I’m from Wenatchee and if we did that down there, people would get all pissed off with us tearing up the park.”

The boarders often leave a yellowish-brown path in the grass where they had 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.

“Your golf 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 has 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 carpooled 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 chairlifts usually stop 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 plunges to the ground while dismounting the rail for the 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.

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 waits 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 outgrew 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-
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 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."

Esmé 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.

"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.

"Hopefully the world will be a more diverse place 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.

"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."

"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 encourages others to practice nudity in organized settings, exposing his own skin is about extending his senses.

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Klipsun is the Lummi word meaning “beautiful sunset.”