



When Janet and her husband started swinging seven years ago, they had rules governing the various permutations of what they would do, and with whom.

Story by
MATT SOERTEL
The Times-Union

"I had so many rules when we started off," says Janet, sitting in the courtyard of a San Marco nightclub with several swinging friends. "But now, seven years later, it's like, whatever."

One thing though: There will be no cheating. Sure, her husband travels a lot on business, and she's given him permission to have sex with other women while he's away. Just tell her about it, she says.

Don't keep it a secret. That would be cheating.

He's lived up to his word: One time, on a trip, he called Janet on the telephone after he'd been with another woman. He sounded a little bummed, Janet remembers. "He even said, 'It wasn't as much fun without you.'"

It wasn't as much fun without you.

That, say some swingers, is key to understanding what they call "the lifestyle." Swinging is a couple's thing, they say. It won't save a bad or sexless marriage. But it does spice up their marriages, allow them to explore their sexuality, and keep their emotions open, they say — without cheating on their spouses.

After all, their spouses are in on the game.

It's true, says Stacy, a personal trainer who makes it clear that she likes to swing. Just so long as it's with her husband, William, who works for a supermarket chain.

She smiles. "I don't do anything without him. Period."

■ ■ ■

To many, the swinging lifestyle calls to mind the shaggy-haired, free-love 1970s, an era depicted again this summer in the TV show *Swingtown*, which became a moderate-sized hit.

That's far from the reality today, though, says Todd Crawford, who, with his wife, Elena, runs www.lovevoodoo.com, a Web site for swingers, which claims around 100,000 registered members.

Crawford, 38, who lives in the Washington, D.C., area, says the lifestyle used to be underground and word-of-mouth — it was difficult to meet others with similar interests.

But the swinging industry has boomed in the age of the Internet, which has allowed online communities of swingers to make real-world connections, complete with real-time video and texting. Web sites such as Craigslist are full of personal ads from swinging couples in cities across the country — including Jacksonville. And online sites let them know about swinging conventions attended by thousands, swinging cruises and swinging clubs.

Florida, a vacation destination and cruise center, is a hotbed for swingers, says Crawford: "More South Florida than Northern Florida, but Florida's absolutely the biggest market in the United States."

He has a saying: "What happens in Florida stays in Florida."

SWINGERS continues on E-2

On this Saturday night at a club in San Marco, it's a pool party, and yes, there is a little toy pool in one corner of the courtyard. Many men have the requisite tank-top and baggy shorts look going. Only a few women have swimsuits, but they're definitely more exotic than you'd normally see on a beach — elaborate one-piece affairs made up of thin criss-crossing strips of fabric. High heels too.

At first glance, it could be any dance club, any "vanilla" club, as swingers call mainstream joints. Sure, on the dance floor there's some grinding going on. And sure, one woman nuzzles another's breasts, then leans down to kiss her bellybutton. In this *Girls Gone Wild* world, how strange is that?

Stick around, though, and you'll notice something unusual: It gets difficult to keep couples straight. There's no guarantee that the person snuggling on someone else's lap is a spouse or significant other, and lap-sitters seem to come and go.

Five clubgoers sit down and agree to talk with a reporter about their swinging, and they're a friendly, open bunch. They're friends who hang out together with their kids, for family-friendly parties and weekends. Indeed, they're so open, some of their more frank comments could never make it

into this story.

However, they know that what they do is taboo, quite possibly ruinous to jobs and family ties and "vanilla" friends. So they talk only under the condition that their real names not be used.

And they all stress one thing: It's the woman who rules in a healthy swingers' relationship. Oh, it may often be the man who raises the issue. "Um, honey, I was thinking..."

But it's the woman who decides if they swing, and how much, and with whom, they say.

"If you ask any woman here, it's about the women," Stacy says.

Her husband, William, grins. Stacy is slim and blond, a knockout. "The women are the currency," he says. "They have all the pull. Without the women, we're just another single guy."

They've come to the club for a party sponsored by Underground Eden (www.undergroundjax.com), a Jacksonville-based one-woman business that caters to swingers. Maggie Barrington calls herself a "party organizer," one who simply provides a place for couples — "broad-minded adults" is her preferred term — to meet other couples.

They meet in San Marco on Saturdays, at a Southside bar on Fridays. They check out attractive people, she says. They strike up friendships. They see if there's chemistry. They flirt.

Maggie, who's something of a kindly den mother to her customers, likes to see the flirting. "It's kind of sad to think that when you get married in your 20s, you're never supposed to flirt again," she says.

Other parts of Florida, particularly in South Florida, have clubs dedicated to swingers, with rooms on-premises where sex takes place. That's not the case in Jacksonville, she says. "Nobody's having sex in the club," says Maggie. "Nobody.

What they do after they leave the club is none of my business."

Many of her customers say they like it that way.

"Women tell me when it's an on-premises club, they feel pressure to do things with other people when they don't really want to," she says. "When they go to a club like mine, they don't. My ladies prefer it this way."

■ ■ ■

Crawford says you'll find all kinds of people among the members of his Web site. The most common profession? Teachers, followed by police officers, firefighters and lawyers. The most common age? Under 30, though his site, he says, skews younger than some.

He figures that about a quarter of his members are Democrats, with about three-quarters being libertarian-leaning Republicans — a description that fits him.

"I think people in the lifestyle are very open-minded. They don't want people telling them what to do," he said. "Most would say they're Republicans, but they're typically pro-choice, anti-school prayer, anti-religion."

Crawford says that in the majority of married couples he's met, the men are straight and the women are bisexual. "Of the thousands of people I meet, if the women I meet tell me they're straight, I'm like, 'Huh?'"

Men are, however, generally more indiscriminate when it comes to partners: "Frankly, I don't think it's really complicated. It's as simple as this: Men are less picky than women. With women, they're way more particular. It's physical for them, but they need to be interested in [a partner] too."

■ ■ ■

Janet came to the pool party without her husband. He volunteered to stay at home to baby-sit their baby, so she could go out for the night. Ja-

net's a stay-at-home mom and massage therapist; she admits that since the birth of her child she's sometimes been a bit jealous of the bodies of the women she's with.

She says she doesn't have fun in vanilla bars. Everyone's uptight, frantic, posturing. And they don't understand her there: "I have a hard time if I see a really hot girl."

Sitting with her are Diane and Mike. They've been married 18 years, and run a lawn-care company together. Years ago, there was a married guy at her work with whom she flirted. At a company Christmas party, Mike suggested she do more than flirt. They approached the other couple with the idea. That was the beginning of a one-year "monogamous" relationship between the two couples.

They've moved on to other couples since then.

Stacy says she goes to church every Sunday. Her husband, William, does too, and he's quick with a grin and a quip. He jokes about the only drawback to group sex: "You've got to get used to being around another guy naked."

William and Mike say they're straight. Janet and Stacy say they're more sexually attracted to women than men.

Diane isn't, but she's willing to have sex with women. On one condition: "I have to know you and like you," she says.

Besides, it makes Mike happy: "If you took a survey and asked married men, 'Would you like to see your wife with another woman?' they'd say, 'Hell yeah.'"

■ ■ ■

Research on swingers has not been very rigorous, though in an online survey of about 1,000

swingers, the majority contended that the practice made their marriages better. Shae Graham Kosch is a bit skeptical. "We don't have any research to follow people for very long to see if that persists over a long period of time," she says.

Kosch is director of the Behavioral Medicine Program at the University of Florida's Department of Community Health and Family Medicine. She works with married couples and with physicians who are going into family medicine.

She notes that a follow-up to a study of swingers done a number of decades ago found that many were no longer married. But then that could be said about non-swingers, she says, noting that about half of all first marriages end in divorce.

Crawford, from the swinging Web site, says flat-out that the lifestyle is not for people with marital troubles.

"If you're looking to solve some problems in your marriage, not only will it not solve the problem, it'll end it quickly," he says.

■ ■ ■

The club-goers in San Marco say every couple has rules when it comes to the lifestyle.

Some don't have sex with other people, but just like the charge of flirting or wearing revealing clothes. Some will engage in sexual acts with others but stop short of intercourse.

Some enjoy watching others having sex, or having others watch them.

Others go far beyond that. Janet says she's been at a party with nine couples, and just about anything went.

They say, though, that most couples would like to add just another woman to the mix. But single women are relatively rare — and prized — in the lifestyle. Single men, too, are uncommon — but only because clubs often put strict limits on how many can attend. Otherwise, they'd be crawling all over the place.

They all say that condoms are commonplace, and that all get tested frequently for sexually transmitted diseases. Indeed, Stacy says she's been asked to show her health reports to others; she's not offended.

"It's not about love," she says. "It's about sex, and if there's friendship at the end of it, that's great."

William says swinging hasn't defined their marriage of 12 years, but only enhances it: "We can separate it. We're married. We're in love. This adds to it, on a sensual level."

They both say they could live without swinging, but why would they want to do that?

"My marriage would survive," says Stacy. "But this is just fun for me."

matt.soergel@jacksonville.com,
(904) 359-4082

A photographer's view of the 'lifestyle'

Photographer Naomi Harris spent five years traveling the United States to shoot swingers in the act. The explicit photographic results are in her book.

America Swings (Taschen, \$500), released in August.

It was, she says, a strange and illuminating experience.

Her first experience came at Swingstock, which she said is "like a four-day camping and fornication festival."

"It was very odd to go up to someone and say, 'Um, don't stop what you're doing, but would you sign a model release for me after you're done?'"

Harris said it's hard to generalize about swingers, other than that they love double-entendres and sexual puns. But they are, indeed, different, she said, from those who, like Harris, don't swing.

Many told her they're "biologically driven to do this," that it's just the way they are.

"I won't call swingers, as a whole, sex addicts, but I do think many are wired differently from the rest of us," she said.

Another couple told Harris that they swing five to six times a week. "That's a lot of work," she marveled.

Consider her reaction at her very first photo shoot: "I felt like I had the problem. What's wrong with me? How come I'm not having orgasm after orgasm like these women?"

Then there was the couple who told her they set their alarm for 5:30 every morning so they can

have sex every day." That left Harris, a single woman without a current boyfriend, a little perplexed.

"As for me, if I have sex every few months, I'm thrilled," she said. "And me, if I'm in a relationship, I'd want to sleep for an extra half-hour!"

Swingers have different approaches to the lifestyle. Harris said: Some just like to watch. Some like the chance to wear sexy clothes or dance naked. Others do just about anything you can imagine, and some you can't. After five years of photographing, she was, she said, still capable of being surprised.

Harris said that women do have considerable power in the world of swinging, as many in the lifestyle insist. But some women told her they swung to please their husbands, who told them they were going to have sex outside of marriage anyway. And it doesn't guarantee a successful marriage: Some couples she met, who spoke of how swinging was "the glue" that held their marriages together, were soon divorced, she said.

There is, though, a strong sense of community, which includes fundraising efforts for fellow swingers in need. "I think there comes a time when a lot of swingers prefer the company of their own kind," Harris said.

And that company can be found just about everywhere.

"It's not just the hip, cool cities," she said. "It's the quiet small towns."