

# BEACH BUZZ

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“Keeping Our Beaches Bare”

## Quest for a Venice, FL clothing optional beach – One group’s efforts

By Ken Thomas

There are currently no legally designated “clothing-optional” beaches in Sarasota County Florida, but that could change. As recently as July 2000, there was no active naturist organization in Sarasota County Florida, but that did change. Offered here is a first person recap of how the idea for a “Euro-style” beach in Sarasota County was born and how The Suncoast Naturists came to be.

At some point during May 2000, my wife and I were telling friends (a husband and wife) about a wonderful weekend we had shared at Haulover Beach the previous month, when the woman said “I’ve never been to a nude beach, will you take us with you the next time you go?” Well, what naturist could refuse a request like that?

A June 2000 date was chosen and I agreed to make all arrangements. Then a surprising thing happened – another couple was invited to join us and they accepted, and then we were six. And then another surprise: The newest couple asked, “Could another woman come along, too?” and then we were seven! But, we were not just an ordinary seven; we were two naturists and five members of the Venice Area Chamber of Commerce (V.A.C.C.). It must be said here that, with the exception of the single woman, my wife and I had socialized and even skinny-dipped in our pool

with the other two couples on several occasions. I learned later that all five were members of the Venice Area Chamber of Commerce and that three were on the Board of Directors!

My wife and I had previously stayed at the Ocean Palm Resort Hotel and saw an opportunity to show these Chamber of Commerce members how a ’50s-’60s vintage motel could do a

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thriving business when located within walking distance of a clothing-optional beach. This became an important item, since the Venice, Florida area has numerous hotels and motels ranging from small to large and relatively new to relatively old, none of which does a business so thriving as to command a two night minimum. Because of the two night minimum requirement at the Ocean Palm Resort, we all agreed to a Friday evening check in and a Sunday morning check out. Knowing that the other five would be car-pooling on Friday, I offered them my copy of the Naturist Society’s Nude & Natural 19.4 issue to read during their four-

hour drive. That issue contains an excellent article, written by Richard Mason, which details exactly how South Florida Free Beaches went about getting a clothing-optional designated area at Haulover Beach Park. Richard’s article had a very large and favorable impact on these five business folks who were traveling to experience their first nude beach. They thoroughly enjoyed the article because it provided answers to all their questions. In short, Richard’s article put them at ease and convinced them that they were not walking into a dangerous or threatening environment.

Their education continued shortly after arriving at the Ocean Palm Resort when I invited them to a starlit walk on the beach. Without asking, I guided our group of seven in a southerly direction and after a few short minutes asked “Hey, would you like to go to the nude beach now?” The answers were “Yes” and I promptly removed my clothes and announced, “We’re here!” After stopping to read the “. . . Beyond This Point . . .” signs, we walked the entire length of the designated area, just to get a feel for how much space had been set aside for clothing-optional use. My friends were amazed and the most memorable comment uttered during that walk was, “This place is huge!”

The next morning we set off for “the beach” and made our way to a spot just south of the volleyball court



where we went through the process of setting up for the day. I had selected this particular area because, from past experience, it is commonly occupied by both mixed gender groups as well as groups of widely ranging ages. Mother Nature smiled on us that day and the weather was perfect. One problem did arise that I had not prepared for, and it came in the form of perfectly flat seas and crystalline clear water. You see there were, among our group of seven, avid snorkelers and SCUBA divers. I had never seen the water at Haulover so calm and clear, and therefore had advised my group to lighten their loads by leaving their snorkel gear at home. I am still paying the price for that mistake.

During the day, on Saturday, our conversations kept returning to how well the users of Haulover behaved, how clean the beach was, and how the crowd just kept growing and growing. Each of my five first-time visitors to Haulover, at one point or another, commented "Wouldn't it be great if we had a beach like this in Venice". And the idea was born!

On Sunday, we formed an ad hoc task force to pursue the idea and assignments were made. I would attempt to contact South Florida Free Beaches to solicit their help, and I would attempt to locate other naturists and non-naturists in the Sarasota County area who would be interested in working toward a "Euro-style" beach. My five friends would assist me in getting established within the local business community. The term "Euro-style" was specifically chosen simply because anything "Euro" is perceived to be more cosmopolitan or trendy. We also knew that the Sarasota County Tourism Development Council successfully advertises itself to the Europeans as a tourist destination, and one cannot visit any beach in Sarasota County without hearing a potpourri of European languages. It is also known

that during their holiday, these visitors spend a lot of money.

My first objective was simple. I composed an email message to South Florida Free Beaches and asked for their help in establishing a clothing-optional beach in my area. This time it was Lady Luck who smiled on me and she appeared in the form of an email response from Shirley Mason.

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***Since that time I, as the President of The Suncoast Naturists, have been warmly accepted into their midst and have been given many opportunities to speak about our idea for a "Euro-style" beach in this area and of the positive economic benefits such an amenity would bring to the community.***

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After a lengthy telephone "interview" with Shirley and then another "interview" with Richard Mason, they agreed to become my mentors in this project.

Following their advice, I contacted The Naturist Society (TNS) to solicit help in contacting other Naturist Society members who lived in the Sarasota County area. Between the years of 1940 and 2000 there had

been only one attempt at organizing local naturists, that being the efforts of the Association for Nude Recreation operated by Bob Hudson. During the past three years I had seen cautious nude use at a couple of isolated local beaches, but had never successfully interacted with anyone. People just remained too tense, looking out for police patrols, to relax and have pleasant conversations.

I asked Nicky Hoffman, at The Naturist Society, for help in locating other Naturist Society members residing in Sarasota County. She asked me to specify the zip codes I wanted them to search and learned that there were, at that time, twenty-five TNS members living in Sarasota County. Nicky encouraged me to compose a letter, which included information about myself, my purpose, and how people could contact me. I then made twenty-four copies of my letter, folded and stuffed them into twenty-four stamped envelopes, and sent them to her, unsealed. Nicky had agreed to create and affix mailing labels to my envelopes and mail them. A short time later the responses began flowing in, both by telephone and email, and our group began to form.

About that same time I contacted the American Association for Nude Recreation (AANR) asking for similar help and was told that "they do not do that sort of thing", but since I was an AANR member I could send them \$30.00 and post an ad in the Personals section of the AANR Bulletin. I did that and, once again, the responses flowed in.

We, who live in Southwest Florida, are fortunate to have predictably warm and beautiful weather in September and October, and this provided an excellent opportunity for my wife and I to host two different pool parties for all of those who responded. Due only to timing, the first pool party was attended by those

TNS members who had received my letter, and the second one was attended by both TNS members and AANR members who had responded to the Bulletin ad; it was at the second pool party that the idea for a new Sarasota area naturist group was put on the table. The outcome was The Suncoast Naturists, which simultaneously became affiliated with The Naturist Society and incorporated in the State of Florida.

One other important event occurred about this same time. With the help of my five friends, I hosted a meeting where a few hand picked local business owners were invited. These were business owners who were felt to be supportive of a “Euro-style” beach in this area. The keynote speakers were to be Shirley and Richard Mason, who agreed to make the drive to Sarasota County. Their task was to explain to our local business owners the economic benefits that are derived from Haulover’s clothing-optional beach and to allow my guests to get answers to questions I was unprepared to give. I took more notes than anyone. To plagiarize someone else’s line, Shirley and Richard did a superb job of convincing my guests that “Nude Recreation Is Good Business.”

As soon as our incorporation papers were filed, The Suncoast Naturists submitted an application to join the Venice Area Chamber of Commerce as a not-for-profit association. I was amazed to learn that there were no less than four different Chamber of Commerce Ambassadors who were eager to sponsor my application. In January 2001, The Suncoast Naturists’ membership application was presented to and accepted by the V.A.C.C. Board of Directors, and we became the first of

our kind to hold membership with them. As a member, we are listed in the V.A.C.C. 2001 Community Directory in the Clubs & Organizations section, right between The Suncoast Chorale and The United Way of South County. Since that time I, as the President of The Suncoast Naturists, have been warmly accepted into their midst and have been given many opportunities to speak about our idea for a “Euro-style” beach in this



area and of the positive economic benefits such an amenity would bring to the community. My message is that we simply want to attract tourists to the Venice area, who seek the enjoyment of a clothing-optional beach. We state loudly, to anyone who will listen, that we are prepared to provide the same support services for “our” beach that South Florida Free Beaches provides for “their” beach. We proudly tout the successes of South Florida Free Beaches and use them as our model. Our strategy has consistently been to gather support from local business owners and managers through education and to rely on those business owners to help us promote this idea. When someone asks how many nudists live in this area, I give that person two responses: 1) “I don’t think that I know them all so I can’t give a specific number, but I would wager that you know at least

one, but you just might not realize it”, and 2) “I’m not looking to satisfy the interest of local residents, I want to attract tourists”. Sure, that is not only an evasive answer, but it is a lie as well. I want to satisfy, both, the interests of local residents and attract tourists at the same time. I, also, want these business owners and local citizens to focus on the potential income from tourist revenue and not worry about how many nudists live in this community. My concluding comment is usually “I don’t know about you, but when I travel, I spend my money a lot more freely than when I’m at home.” If nothing else, that is a statement they must agree with.

With help and advice from people like Nicky Hoffman, Shirley and Richard Mason, and Marvin Frandsen we have made significant advancements toward our goal of educating the community about the virtues of well managed clothing-optional beaches and the proof is in the numbers. Back in January and February of 2001 I was presenting this idea to one person at a time and at the end of April I presented the “Euro-style” beach idea to the entire Venice Area Chamber of Commerce Executive Committee and Board of Directors. While I do not intend to ask the V.A.C.C. for a specific endorsement of this idea, I do intend to ask them to individually take one of two positions, namely “I am dead set against this idea” or “I am not against this idea”. Watch this space for future updates of our successes.

*Note: Ken Thomas is the President of The Suncoast Naturists. He lives with his wife in Osprey Florida and can be reached at thomaskw@gte.net or at 941-918-8915. ☆*