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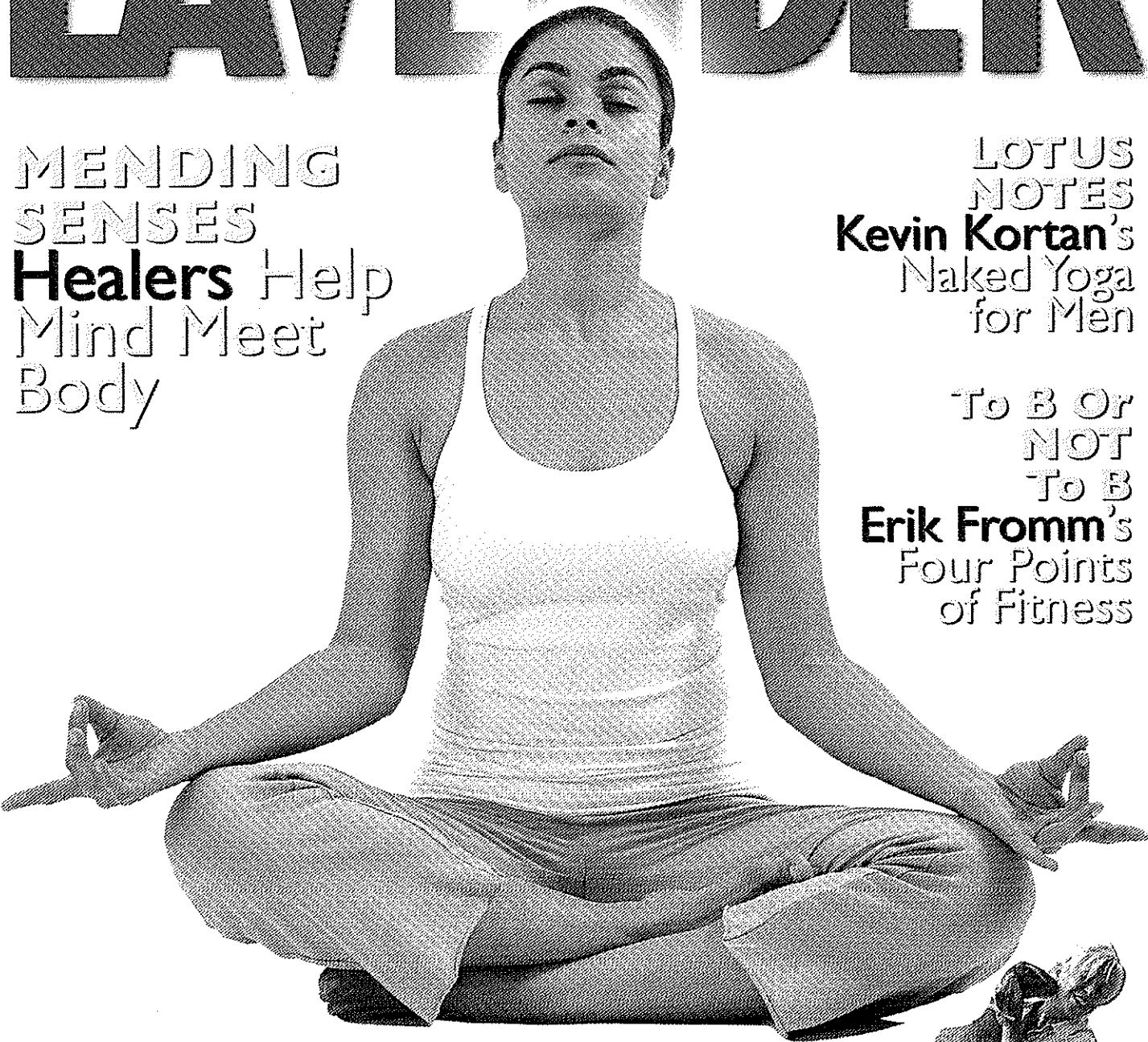
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OUT OF THE WOODS



"I joined Outwoods because of my love of outdoor activities, and I wanted to share that with a group of like-minded GLBTers."

IT'S WINTER. GET OUTSIDE AND make some friends. No snow? That's no excuse. Just because you can't cut across the face of a mountain with a pair of K2 Apache Recons strapped to your feet, or mangle a pristine meadow under the treads of your Arctic Cat, doesn't mean you have to stay indoors surrounded by the detritus of the holidays, while your ass widens as you watch your TiVo reruns of *Desperate Housewives*.

To that end, Outwoods, the only local entirely volunteer-run, subscription-based outdoor recreation group for GLBT folks, invites you to join for winter activities galore. This 17-year-old community fixture is still alive and well, and having a blast.

John Rossakis, an education professional who has led several group activities, says, "One big thing I've discovered since joining is that I can have fun during the winter in Minnesota. While I don't like skiing, I discovered how much I like snowshoeing and tubing."

A longtime Minnesota resident transplanted from the East Coast, Rossakis admits, "Before I joined the group, I basically hibernated the winter months away."

John Medeiros, a local writer and office manager at a downtown law firm, agrees: "Roughing it in the cabin up north [last] February with no running water and no electricity was a bit of a challenge, especially for an inexperienced camper like me, but it was one of the best experiences I had."

The success and longevity of Outwoods are based on a very simple system: Buying a year's subscription for \$20 to the group's print newsletter gives you membership. Your fee covers the costs of printing and mailing, as well as the Web site. In return, you gain access to a range of events every month, plus an online forum to stay up-to-date on last-minute plans.

The egalitarian structure of the group means that any member can lead an event. Members are encouraged to become leaders by coming up with the best ways to enjoy the natural world safely and responsibly, including hiking, kayaking, snowshoeing, or any number of other activities. Activities are limited only by the imaginations of members.

Outwoods events strive to have a sharing, supportive, respectful, and cooperative atmosphere outdoors. They seem to be succeeding.

"It really is a fantastic group," Rossakis enthuses. "I joined Outwoods because of my love of outdoor activities, and I wanted to share that with a group of like-minded GLBTers."

Although the Twin Cities has many predominately straight outdoor clubs, Rossakis finds that a straight group, just like living in a straight world, sometimes makes it difficult to "be yourself, and talk about your life openly with others while you're on the hiking trail."

Outwoods members are self-described outdoor enthusiasts—rather than hard-core athletes—whose values are arranged around a love of, and appreciation for, nature.

"Minnesota has so much to offer in

terms of natural scenic beauty," Medeiros remarks. "At a time when our community is laden with Internet chatting and virtual friendships, it's becoming rarer and rarer for people to connect, not only with others, but with nature around them.

"I truly believe that when we connect with our surroundings, we get a better sense of self, and a better sense of the world in which we live. These types of connections make us humble and reverent, and tend to get lost in the Internet culture in which we live."

Upcoming activities include the provocatively named Bear Head State Park trip, January 19-23; a candlelight ski at Wild River on January 27; and a President's Day Weekend outing in Northern Minnesota.

These are just a sampling of events. As members come forward to lead a trip, by the time you read this, several other opportunities may be planned to meet new people.

To find the most up-to-date information, sign up at <www.outwoods.org> to receive a complimentary copy of the newsletter. ■

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