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the HAES® files: The Pool Party

BY HEALTH AT EVERY SIZE® BLOG

by Stacey Nye, PhD FAED

When I was in the 11th grade I took Junior Honors English. Back then students didn't take the abundance of honors and AP classes that they do today, and so this was a big deal for me. It was one of my all time favorite classes. Mrs. Gordon, the teacher, was smart, warm and funny. She inspired me to read books that I might have never read otherwise, such as *Moby Dick* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Furthermore, my entire friend group, consisting of my closest girlfriends and the boys we hung out with, (including Sam, whom I secretly loved), was in the class. I looked forward to it every day.

At the end of the school year, Mrs. Gordon rewarded us with a pool party at her house. This generous gesture, practically unheard of otherwise, was a real treat. There was only one problem—I was terrified to walk around in a bathing suit in front of my friends, especially Sam. After much agonizing, I ultimately decided to go to the party, but didn't bring a bathing suit. This way, I reasoned, I could be with my friends, but not expose my body.

I arrived at the party and all of my friends were in the pool, of course. Shouts and hollers from them to put on my suit and get in the pool surrounded me. "I forgot it" I lamely replied, as I sat alone on the deck and sipped a soda. Mrs. Gordon soon approached me and offered to lend me one of her suits. I feared further protesting would seem ridiculous, so I relented, and she showed me to a place I could change.

As I gazed at my reflection in the mirror, I felt sick to my stomach with shame and dread. My fat thighs were prominently exposed, and putting on a brown old lady swimsuit only made it worse. When I finally exited the changing room and began what felt like my death walk to the pool, a funny thing happened. Sam and his best friend Ben jumped out of the pool, ran over to me, picked me up and *threw me in*. It was terrible (my hair!) and wonderful (I felt like one of the gang) at the same time. They appeared to not even notice my thighs. I ended up having a great time at the party.

I can still remember this happening like it was yesterday. Since I am still in touch with my friends, including Sam and Ben, I recently I told them both this story and asked them if they remembered it. They both said the same thing. They remembered Mrs. Gordon's party, but they didn't remember that I didn't bring a swimsuit, that I ended up wearing Mrs. Gordon's suit, that they threw me in the pool, or what my thighs looked like. Of course not, only I would remember that.

Unfortunately, as I got older, my bathing suit shame continued after what should have been a valuable lesson. While I no longer refused

to wear a bathing suit, I was never able to relax in it. I would spend way too much money on them, rationalizing that the more money they cost, the more confident I would feel. I was vigilant about the way I sat in my lounge chair, i.e., knees bent to avoid thigh spreading. And whenever I stood up, I would wrap a towel around my waist.

I remember the exact moment that I stopped doing that. One day my adoring yet straightforward husband looked at me in my towel and asked me what I thought I was hiding under it. "Do you think that people can't see what you look like under there?" Although most people I tell this to have responded to that comment with horror, I thought it was brilliant. He was right and it freed me to stop hiding. And the more I walked around with my head held high and my body out there for everyone to see, the easier it got, the better I felt about myself, and the more positively people responded to me. I learned that confidence is beautiful and sexy, no matter how big your thighs are. Additionally, the more involved I became in the HAES® movement, the more passionate I became about the need to accept and appreciate body diversity. Bodies of all shapes, sizes and colors are beautiful and deserve to be cool in the summertime.

I continue to live and breathe that message. Recently, my husband and I were out with another couple. We were invited back to their house for drinks and a dip in their hot tub. As I changed into my suit and gazed at my reflection in the mirror, I remembered my pool party experience and scanned my emotions for any remaining traces of shame. Aside from some minor awkwardness at the idea of 4 adults going from being fully clothed to being (basically) in their underwear, I was okay. And I continue, to this day, to excitedly anticipate summer and the opening of our local pool. I strut back and forth from my lounge chair to the snack bar in my fabulous swimsuit (some things don't change) sans towel, while women much thinner than me cover up. I feel tremendous compassion for them and for the insecure girl that I was. I didn't know then that I didn't need to change the way I looked to be attractive or loved. But if it weren't for her, I wouldn't be the therapist that I am today, telling my pool party story to each of my body image groups and hopefully modeling positive body image for my peers. So dive in! The water is divine!

Stacey Nye is a Clinical Psychologist and Founding Fellow of the Academy for Eating Disorders. She does individual and group psychotherapy specializing in eating disorders, body image, depression, anxiety and women's issues. Her practice is in Mequon, WI. Check out her website at www.nyepsychotherapy.com

