

NAAFA

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION TO AID FAT AMERICANS, INC.

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SUPPLEMENT TO NAAFA NEWSLETTER, VOL. IX, ISSUE NO.2 (JAN-APR, 1982)

NAAFA--WHAT'S IN A NAME?

(Speech delivered by Sheila Goodman, President, at Atlantic City, New Jersey on October 11, 1981)

Mr. Chairman, members of the Board, members of NAAFA and distinguished guests - good afternoon.

Working on the convention has, naturally, brought NAAFA closer to me than ever before. Writing the word "NAAFA" so many times these last few months made me think about what the letters N A A F A really stand for, and if they were appropriate, so I decided to break down the word and see for myself.

"N" for National. Well, right there I ran into trouble. We started, in 1969, with a dream . . . a dream to start a national organization to help fight fat discrimination, to help fat people feel better about themselves, and to fight the prejudices running rampant in the medical, legal, fashion and business communities in America. The reality proved bigger than the dream. We are well on our way to accomplishing that which we set out to do . . . but it isn't only here in America. NAAFA is known in Europe, the Far East, the Carribean and, I'm sure, places that we don't even know about. So . . . perhaps our name should start with the word "International".

"A" for Association. Webster's defines the word "Association" as, among other things:

"The state of being associated; fellowship; companionship . . . a body of persons associated for common purpose . . . the connection or relation of ideas and feelings . . ."

Well, I certainly can't fault our founding fathers and mothers for that word. All of us sitting here this afternoon are connected by fellowship, with a common purpose and a relationship of feelings. The rap sessions already conducted and yet to be held at this convention help spread our ideas to each other.

Members and friends from 26 states, Canada and the Virgin Islands are here to reaffirm our association with each other. An association that has brought dignity, support, comfort, companionship, friendship, strength, laughter and, in many cases, love, into our lives. Yes, the word "association" should stay.

"A" for Aid. What did our founders have in mind with that word? I knew they couldn't mean aid such as in Blue Cross and Blue Shield and they couldn't possibly mean financial aid. Perhaps they meant aid such as in travelers aid --- aid in finding our way. So many of us were so very lost when we found NAAFA --- when NAAFA came to our aid. But it still wasn't clear what "aid" meant. I thought about the psychological aid NAAFA has given to help us erase the years of conditioning when we were raised to believe that our worth was determined by the size of our clothes, and the numbers on our bathroom scales. We learned to realize that we were people with pride . . . with values . . . with hearts and brains to think and accomplish. I thought about the political aid we've received. I remembered with pride the times that legislators called upon NAAFA to be an expert witness, when attempting to have anti-fat discrimination legislation passed, and how often that legislation was passed. I thought about the legal aid NAAFans have received, such as a case in which a fat employee (who was laid off with many of the staff of a New York City municipal hospital) and was not rehired when new funding was received simply because of her weight and how NAAFA helped her seek her legal redress. NAAFans across the country participated in a letter writing campaign which forced her union to abide by its own laws, grant her a hearing, and then rehire her . . . retroactively.

And, of course, I had to think about the social aid we've received from NAAFA - an aid which for many of us opened new worlds - worlds which we were taught to believe were forever closed to fat people. NAAFA gave us dances, where for the first time we could also dress up, where we could wear low-cut gowns and sexy dresses and high-heeled shoes and false eyelashes.

NAAFA introduced to us men who not only said "it's all right to be fat", but preferred us that way. It also provided F.A.'s with a place to meet fat women - - meetings which, in many cases, brought about lasting, meaningful relationships. Through NAAFA many of us went on picnics for the first time, went to swimming parties, went on fishing trips, joined chapters and talked about our feelings, our hurts, our fears. We met people who supported us, who stroked our hurt souls and helped make us whole.

We went to conventions, we made new friendships which lasted long after the convention was but a beautiful memory. We attended rap sessions and workshops that refreshed us and gave us renewed vigor and determination. Oh yes, social aid was most definitely a part of the aid our founding fathers must have meant.

"F" for Fat. We all know NAAFA is not only for fat people, or even only for fat admirers. NAAFA is for everyone who believes in sovereignty ... everyone who believes in peoples' right to be the size they are . . . everyone who hates discrimination on any level. So maybe "fat" really isn't the operative word.

"A" for Americans was an easy one - - that definitely was wrong. We now have members not only in the United States and Canada, but Belgium, England, France, Australia, West Germany, West Indies and the Virgin Islands.

After doing all that studying, I figured we had to change the name of our organization. I wanted a name that would tell it all . . . that would leave no doubt about exactly what we had in mind and what we did and what our goals were. To this end, I figured our name should be IAPPPLSAFTFAFP or the INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION TO PROVIDE PSYCHOLOGICAL, POLITICAL, LEGAL, AND SOCIAL AID TO FOREIGN AND AMERICAN FAT AND THIN PERSONS.

Wow . . . what a mouthful. We'd never get it on our letterhead and still leave enough room for the letter. Our business cards would have to be carried around in attache cases, and by the time the name was spoken on our answering machine, the tape would run out.

I guess then we have to keep the name "NAAFA", and that's ok. Maybe the name doesn't exactly convey everything we are and everything we're trying to be - - - but it is a name, and an idea that we all love and respect and therefore, NAAFA is a name we shall keep and treasure!

THE YEARS AHEAD--NAAFA'S ROLE IN THE 1980's

(Excerpts from the speech delivered by William J. Fabrey, Chairman of the Board of Directors, at Atlantic City, New Jersey on October 11, 1981.)

I'd like to speak to you on the role of NAAFA in the 1980's. My usual speech at these conventions concerns itself with what has happened to NAAFA in the past 10 years, and how far we have come. I think Sheila Goodman covered that subject pretty well this year, and I really want to spend my time talking about the future.

There are several reasons for this. I think that NAAFA is at some kind of a threshold. For one thing, we're in the process of promoting some changes in the organization. For instance, I am no longer President. I've been "elevated" to the Chair of the Board, otherwise known as the C.O.B., and some of my former responsibilities given to other officers. We're pursuing regular Newsletters with renewed vigor and I think that's of special interest not only to members who live in out of the way places but even those who live in big cities. There are NAAFA members who live one block from each other who don't know each other, and who feel cut off from the organization. The Newsletter is obviously crucial in our future.

We're about to undertake a change in staff as you may know. Our long-time Executive Secretary, Liz Fisher, has announced her retirement as a paid staff member of NAAFA. It was under her guidance that we built ourselves up from 300 members to a 1500 member organization. But at this point we are going to be moving the office and changing some of the ways that the work is divided up.

Another reason to talk about the future is that this movement (I don't mean just NAAFA, but the entire fat liberation movement) is on the verge of being self sustaining. And I've never been able to say that before. I think that even if NAAFA were to close its doors as an official organization, fat liberation would persist in this country in other forms.

I think that there has been a lack of future planning in this organization. We have been so busy printing literature, attempting to retain members, struggling to get out Newsletters, and attending to the hassles of running an organization that we largely tended to ignore our future direction. One of our frequent critics and also constructive contributors, Karl Niedershuh, has said that NAAFA's greatest need is more future planning, and he may be right.

Now, I said a moment ago that NAAFA is not the entire fat liberation movement. Many of you

are aware of the fact that there are other groups that have been doing things mostly on local levels in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and various other communities. Some gay men's and women's groups have done work along these lines. Some radical women's organizations have been promoting things like fat women's caucuses; these things will continue no matter what NAAFA does but I like to feel that we have a leadership position in this country, especially among not-for-profit groups.

Even though we're a leader we can't make everybody happy which brings us to another question. Is NAAFA going to continue to be a middle-of-the-road kind of organization or are we going to take strong stands on everything? Take the great button controversy . . . should our button read "Fat Can Be Beautiful" or more strongly, "Fat Is Beautiful"? The problem, of course, is that some NAAFA members don't really believe the latter statement, and can't be expected to warm up to it as a slogan.

Is NAAFA going to remain moderate on the subject of dieting and weight loss or should we take an official stand against dieting, in view of strong evidence that dieting is usually unsuccessful and is often hazardous to physical and mental health? On the other hand can we take a strong stand against something that many of our members still wish to do and a few of them may do successfully? Does NAAFA wish to take a position on experimental surgical weight loss methods, of which there are several? Gastroplasty is currently in vogue but I dare say that in the next ten years there will be other experimental surgical methods of weight loss. There always are. Is NAAFA going to take a stand on any of these methods?

Are we going to promote a big push against fat discrimination? Even though we talk a lot about court cases, legal aid, and employment discrimination, with our limited resources we have not been able to do more than one percent of what we wanted to do. In some cases, in order to help one person, the organization had to overlook many other requests for aid. Is NAAFA going to involve itself more in legal aid in the future, or will we continue to struggle just to keep NAAFA alive?

Not everyone thinks that NAAFA should take a strong position on these issues. If for example a vote were taken at a meeting of the Board of Directors about a controversial subject such as surgical weight loss, you would find a substantial difference of opinion on the Board. I believe this would occur in NAAFA's membership as well.

I would like to suggest to you that NAAFA's proper role in the future should remain a middle-of-the-road position, possibly a little stronger but still basically a place for a person to go who has an inquiring mind and who needs and wants to hear the evidence on both

sides. I would be very happy to see other organizations spring up that take stronger stands on these issues, but I would hate to divide our own membership in endless debate.

We also have to decide what kind of emphasis should be placed on national activities versus local activities. I think that the trend in this organization will be towards more local activities and more regionalism. I think we still need a strong national office, a strong Newsletter, and assistance to local chapters, but the areas of the country where we see the most NAAFAs renewing, and that we draw our leadership from are those that have successful local chapters. I have to admit to you that I have changed my position on that subject. I used to be more sceptical of local groups and their abilities, but I now feel the future of fat liberation is going to increasingly involve a grass roots movement, even including people who have never heard of NAAFA. This is a trend that I think should be encouraged.

I think that we will probably have more regional conventions because, while many of us are here at this convention, ninety percent of NAAFA's membership are not here. Many NAAFAs can't afford to travel very far to attend conventions. Regional conventions will probably attract a number of people who otherwise will never experience a NAAFA convention, especially as travel costs continue to rise.

NAAFA will tend to decentralize itself to a certain extent over the next few years, partly through increased local chapter activity, and partly through national committees that are at a distance from New York. This process has already begun. But to continue it, we will have to offer more help to local chapters to get them "off the ground", and to continue growing, than we have in the past.

I would also like to see the Board of Directors of NAAFA decentralized. And by that I don't mean that the present Board of Directors (which is drawn mainly from the New York area) is deficient. However, in most national organizations it is a healthier situation if policy is determined by people from various parts of the country. The best way this could be accomplished is for NAAFA to ultimately have a decentralized Board of Directors. I am familiar with another organization that does this successfully; they hold quarterly meetings around the country at different locations. We probably will need at least five thousand members to afford the expense of decentralized Board meetings.

NAAFA will increasingly have to help people within NAAFA who have not just the general interest of NAAFA at heart, but have additional interests that they wish to promote. For instance there was a recent attempt to have a "couples club" in the New York area, for married couples or those having a serious relationship, to provide a social environment

that is different than the usual singles scene that exists in this organization. There is talk about a camping special interest group (or "SIG"). Dozens of others are possible.

NAAFA (and also each chapter) will have to decide how much energy is going to be put into purely social activities and how much into non-social activities such as political action, consciousness raising and so forth. All of these areas are legitimate. Anything that relates to the needs of people, social or non-social, is legitimate. Some NAAFAs feel that "social activities" are trivial. However, NAAFA has many worthwhile capable volunteers who would not have been so had they had not come to dances and gone through the usual kind of interactions that take place and finally after a year or two come to the point where they feel good about themselves and can then progress to other areas of interest in NAAFA.

NAAFA needs more active men. About forty percent of our members are men. But a lot of these men don't seem to come to our functions. Not only do we need more men but we need to get the ones we have to functions. Not that I have anything against women--but we obviously need a balance in this organization. I think that one of the problems is that many men who might be interested in an organization like this are just too busy in their careers, helping to support a family or doing whatever they do. Some of them are hobbyists, or sports enthusiasts or whatever, spending virtually all of their spare time in such endeavors, and it doesn't occur to them to join an activist kind of organization like this. Women tend to be much more likely to join such organizations than men do.

NAAFA will have to make some decisions about professionalism versus non-professionalism in NAAFA committees and activities. We're amateurs about most of what we do in this organization. For example, I am a graduate electrical engineer; my courses in engineering never taught me anything about how to run a fat liberation organization. Most of us have grown into the kind of roles that we have with NAAFA. Yet if this organization is going to progress we need more people in specific jobs who are really professionals at those jobs. One example: NAAFA finances are becoming so complicated that we're fortunate in having a new assistant treasurer, Susan Hoey, who just took over the job several weeks ago. Being a full time bookkeeper, she is able to handle the kinds of challenges that our treasury represents. There are many other jobs in NAAFA that demand more professionalism if possible.

The most important thing that NAAFA has to do in the next ten years is to make life easier for fat people. The only way we are going to succeed is to avoid factionalism, major political struggles, and all the kinds of diversions which take our energy away from our true goals.

When I founded NAAFA twelve years ago, I basically set up, let's face it, a bureaucracy. And the reason I did that is that I felt the only way we could change society was with the tools that society uses itself. It would have been very easy to form an "ad hoc" committee to help fat people but I felt something that was going to last ten or twenty years had to have such things as constitutions, corporation status, Boards of Directors, elections, and so forth. We saw the membership grow from 9 to 1500. I think now our goal should be something like 30 or 40 percent growth per year for the next ten years, which could result in 12,000 members by 1990.

Many of us will still be members of NAAFA in 1990. A membership of 12,000 would allow NAAFA to do many things it cannot now do. Admittedly, I thought that NAAFA would have 1000 members by the end of the first six months of its formation and of course, I was disappointed when we had only 50. However, I think we have a good chance to get a few thousand more members in the next several years.

In conclusion, I think we need to focus on enrolling more members, even ten times as many members as we now have. I would like to see a decentralized Board of Directors, and I would like to see chapters more self-sufficient and incorporated. I hope to see NAAFA remain basically a generalized moderate kind of organization because there is none other like that. There is no other NAAFA.

Finally, I'd like to tell you that after bringing this organization into existence and staying with it for twelve years and attending all 119 board meetings except for one, I'm tired; I've given a lot of thought about my long-time involvement in the mechanics of running this organization. I think I'd like to see NAAFA be able to function totally self-sufficiently without my weekly or monthly chairmanship.

I know I shall always remain active in this organization in some function or another. I'm now Chairman of the Board. My term expires this December. I will probably run for another term. And if the Board chooses to re-elect me, I will remain. But I'm giving serious thought to calling it quits after another three years, and filling some other need of this organization. Any organization or movement to survive must have new leadership-in-training, and new talent coming up all the time. None of us is immortal; I'm 40 years old and I have twenty or so years left to career development, which has nothing to do with NAAFA at all.

I have no regrets over the time I have spent on NAAFA in the past, and I look forward to an interesting future for this organization!
