



The Oregonian

'MiPL' up some new acquaintances

An Internet group connects Portlanders with new friends through wide-ranging activities

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When Cassy Cole arrived in Portland from London three years ago, she didn't know anyone. "I lived here for a year," Cole says, "and I had no idea how to meet people. For a single guy, it's much easier to go out to a sports bar or something. For a single girl, though, you can't exactly march up to a group of other girls and ask, 'Can I hang out with you?'"

Then, on an online forum, Cole read about a new social group that was forming in Portland. It was called MEETinPortland, and its sole goal was to connect people who like to get out and have fun.

At the first meeting, held at a coffeehouse, Cole and eight others showed up. They planned another event, and then another. That was two years -- and more than 4,000 members -- ago.

Founded four years ago in Washington, D.C., MEETin held its first event there in December 2002. Today the group is in 80 cities around the world and counts 45,000 members. One in 10 of those is a Portlander, making the local group MEETin's second-most active. In June alone, Portland members had their choice of more than 100 events, including book groups, pub crawls, games nights, theater excursions, dining-out parties, movies, skiing, kayaking and dog-walking.

MEETinPortland (usually abbreviated by group members to "MiPL," and pronounced to rhyme with "nipple") is free. No dues, no fees. Anyone can attend any event; anyone can create an event simply by posting it on the group's Web site, www.meetinportland.org.

The only rules? No singles events, no political events and definitely no networking: This is solely a social group, not a venue for pickups or handing out business cards.

MiPL get-togethers run from the sedate (koffeeklatsches, knitting groups, games night) to the outlandish, such as the "Urban Iditarod" (a race across the Burnside Bridge, with participants dressed as dogs towing shopping carts) and the "Techno Train," a mass takeover of a MAX train by a carful of frenzied dancers and a boombox.

'Minglers' each month

The Portland contingent is led informally by Cole and another organizer, along with a loose board of 13 others, which mostly gathers to plan the group's bigger parties, including the monthly "Mingler," an evening designed to welcome newcomers as well as old friends. They also coordinate volunteer activities for outside groups, such as Hands On Portland and the Oregon Food Bank.

Alex Bender of Vancouver discovered the group after coming to Portland from Eastern Washington. "People are friendly here, but not as friendly as some places I've lived," the Texas native says. Through MiPL, Bender says, he's found friends who share some of his interests: hiking, in-line skating and country dancing.

Board member Amy Chen moved to town from Seattle in November 2003 and used the group not only to meet people, but to discover Portland: "I got to know the city and had the chance to try out a bunch of new restaurants and festivals." Since then, she's hosted everything from Seahawks viewing parties to

dog park get-togethers with Bernie, her St. Bernard.

"That's the beauty of it," Chen says. "There's just so many different activities for so many different types of people."

Bulls on the street

On a recent night in the Yamhill District, three dozen MiPLers gathered for the "Running of the Bulls," a goofy pub crawl loosely themed on Pamplona's running of the bulls. Microbrew-drinking toreadors ran from pub to pub, chased by Silly String-wielding "bulls," including event organizer "Cap'n" Ed Querfeld.

"When I moved here from San Francisco, most of the people I knew were married," Querfeld says, "so I joined the group looking for new friends." Since then, he's hosted ski parties, sports events and wine tastings and attended nearly 200 other events.

Friends Charlene Conley and Nicolas McCarthy were bemused by the bullish spectacle. This was their first MiPL event (Conley got word of it on a local listserv), but both said it wouldn't be their last. "Anything with a costume -- well, you know it's going to be fun people," Conley said.

Unlike MySpace or other online social groups, MiPL isn't designed to keep members at their computers. Just ask Cole. Since that first meeting, she's participated in more than 500 MiPL events from skydiving to scavenger hunts.

"We're an offline group that organizes online," Cole says. "But then we get out and do things."

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