

THE ISLAND; IN THIS CLUB, YOU HAVE TO MEASURE UP

IT may be a long island, but it's a tall world -- at least for the members of the Tall Club of Long Island, one of some 60 Tall Club International chapters in North America and a member of the Northeast Alliance of Tall Organizations (which you may call NEATO if you're tall enough).

"We have about 40 members in our chapter, depending upon who's all paid up with their dues," said Frank Ciccone, 58, of Hicksville, who is a shade under 6 feet 6 inches and the president of the Long Island chapter.

He gathered his tall tribe two weekends ago for its annual Valentine's brunch at the White Whale restaurant here. Roughly 20 members sat around a long table with Mr. Ciccone at the head. They were wearing red for Valentine's Day, and from the bar, the gathering looked like a box of candy canes.

The club's formal mission, according to its Web site, is "to promote friendship and good fellowship among tall people," "to positively influence tall lives around the globe" and "to send a tall message to a world dominated by goods and services designed for the, well basically, less vertically gifted." More practically speaking, the mission is to eat, drink and meet other tall people at club dinners, dances, holiday festivities, barbecues and pool parties.

"We have the same commonality," said Arlene Krinsky, of Howard Beach, Queens, who is 5-foot-10. "We've all heard the same jokes: 'How's the weather up there?' 'Do you play basketball?' 'Hey, Jolly Green Giant.' At some point, you just want to meet someone to dance with who you don't have to stare down at."

Loretta Stefek, a six-footer from Bayside, Queens, agreed. "When tall people marry shorter people, a lot of times it doesn't work out," she said. "Sometimes it's hard to meet someone your height. I went to my high school reunion and it was a short crowd, like 5-4 or 5-5."

Members must measure up: 6 feet 2 inches for men and 5 feet 10 inches for women. Applicants are carefully measured against a large ruler that club officials hang from a doorway or ceiling. Inevitably, members may shrink an inch or two from their official club height, but unless a membership lapses for more than five years, one cannot be shipped out for shrinkage.

At the White Whale, many members had to duck in and out of the doorway. Ken Marino, 53, who is 6-foot-8, bumped his head on a hanging light. He and his wife Barbara, 55 and another six-footer, met at the club. They are both schoolteachers from Coram.

Keith Nyhan, 53, a 6-foot-8 1/2-inch mortgage broker from Bethpage, and his wife, Valarie, 53 (she's 5-foot-11), got together at the club five years ago. Karen Sabal, 50, was with the Atlantic chapter when she met Mr. Ciccone at the Tall Club's 2004 national convention in Niagara Falls. They became engaged in August. But plenty of tall singles were at the White Whale.

The big ruler hanging from the ceiling deemed this reporter about five inches too short for the club.

"If you really want to join, we have a stretching rack," said Ms. Sabal, who can laugh about it because she is 5-foot-11.

"Yeah, but we charge by the inch," Mr. Nyhan snapped.

Not that some applicants do not stretch the truth about their height. "A few years ago, somebody had the height on his license altered," Ms. Sabal said. "He was shorter than me. We also had a woman who wouldn't take off her heels. The bylaws say 'stocking feet.'"

If a married couple wants to join, both have to measure up. A too-short spouse can become an associate member. Certain people who do not measure up but whose contributions to the community exemplify "the goal and spirit" may become honorary members.

Some members attend regional, national or world conventions (this year's is in Germany in April). Some female members, including Ms. Sabal and Ms. Stefek, have entered the annual Miss Tall International pageant to compete against other chapters, including the Boston Beanstalks, the High Cincinnatians, the California Tip Toppers, the Portland Skyliners, the Bay Area Tall Texans and the Skyscraper Club of Cleveland.

Club members fight for tall causes, including opposing the shrinking of headroom in cars and legroom in airplanes and for the right to buy a decent-fitting suit at a clothing store. The club raises money to fight Marfan syndrome, which affects tall people.

Mr. Ciccone has conducted the NEATO Olympics the last two years at his home. Events included volleyball, tug of war and races while balancing things. The performances are mixed, he said.

"We're tall," he said. "That doesn't mean we're athletic."

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