

## FAR FROM THE MADDENING CROWD **IONIA COMMUNITY FINDS A PLACE TO LIVE IN HEALTH, PEACE**

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Four men in baggy cotton clothes and floppy hats loaded logs onto a new John Deere tractor as they painstakingly cleared a field out of the surrounding forest. It was slow, sweaty labor. But it was paying off. On the land they'd already opened, newly planted rows of barley, oats and wheat poked out of the soil. One day, say residents of **Ionia Inc.**, some 40 acres of organic grains will be growing here.

They believe they can raise cereal grains in Southcentral Alaska. Experts say the odds against it are long. But **Ionia** has beaten long odds before.

"The people we bought this land from ... thought we wouldn't make it through our first winter," said Barry Creighton, 57, one of the original residents of this small vegetarian enclave.

**Ionia** was carved out of the woods in 1987 by a handful of families who were fed up with the world, frightened by it and, they say, poisoned by it. They all were dealing in some way with mental illness -- schizophrenia, paranoia, you name it -- **Ionia** residents say. Fathers, mothers and some children were failing in their jobs, school and relationships.

They wanted to create a society of their own, a place they could live in peace. "We were just looking to disappear," Creighton said. "We're people who had to leave the amusement park."

After a yearlong cross-country journey from Boston, through California and into the Pacific Northwest, they found just what they were looking for in Coho Loop, a finger of forest buffered on two sides by Cook Inlet and on the other by the Kasilof River.

**Ionia** is not a commune, residents say. And it is not a homestead, exactly. But the reclusive **community** is often compared to one, albeit a homestead with an "Alice in Wonderland" flavor.

To wander into Ionia -- with its cluster of tall, white canvas tepees, vegetable gardens, children jumping on trampolines and identical log homes fitted with computers but no television -- is to enter a separate world.

Ionia's families make their own clothes -- big, loose-fitting dungarees that would make a snowboarder do a double take and floor-length cotton dresses straight out of "Little House on **the** Prairie." They grow much of their own food, such as kale, turnips and daikon, a Japanese radish, harvested **from the** community greenhouses. They prepare meals together, eat together and play together. Most important, Ionia's members say, they meet several times a week to settle inevitable disputes that arise when several families set out to pool their resources and raise some 30 children together.

## CROSS-CONTINENT JOURNEY

At Ionia's core are four like-minded families who met in Boston in **the** early 1970s. **The** whirling pace and clatter of American culture were driving them crazy.

They tried living in a Boston neighborhood but were seen as too weird, said Creighton's wife, Cathy, 55. They were practically forced out in 1985, first stopping in California. After spending the winter as caretakers at a summer camp, the families drove northwest, thinking Seattle would have the space they needed. It didn't. Finally, Barry Creighton recalled saying, "Let's go to Alaska. We've got nothing left."

Anchorage, deep in recession in 1986, was a renter's market, but it had too many people. The Creightons feared that they would just attract attention and that it would be like Boston all over again.

Then Aron Wolf, a longtime Anchorage psychiatrist, suggested they take a look at Kasilof. This is a place where one resident built a house of old car tires, where sled dogs may outnumber humans and where a bar is trying to enter the "Guinness Book of World Records" with its collection of 16,500 hats.

Wolf turned out to be right. The **community** accepted **Ionia** with little more than a shrug. Neighbors, separated by acres of woods, don't seem to have a problem with what many people still call "the tepee village."

Wolf also steered the families toward a lawyer who helped them establish the umbrella nonprofit corporation that allows them to apply for state and private grants. "We've been bowled over from the beginning that Alaska accepts us," said **Ionia** resident Michael Becherer, 48, a veteran of the group's cross-continent journey.

In the years since, they have drawn friends, relatives, even people they've never met but who share their ideas about solace and **community** and their need to treat, or at least address, mental illness.

When they arrived, many of the residents were so gripped by schizophrenia and paranoia that they barely functioned, said Cathy Creighton, using herself as an example.

"Twelve years ago, if you would have come to my house, I would have disappeared," she said.

Barry Creighton said he either would have stared at the floor or started ranting. "The basic thought was 'How are you going to hurt us?' " he said. Suspicion of the outside world remains strong, but **Ionia's** residents increasingly find themselves coming into contact with it. They say they're OK with that, as long as they have the village to fall back on.

"This environment is something we're flourishing in," said Ted Eller, 46, another longtime resident. "Put us somewhere else, and it's another matter. We'd wither on the vine. There wouldn't be any companionship."

## NO RELIGIOUS COMPONENT

If one word conveys the sense of the place, it may be companionship. **Ionia** shuns words like "commune" and especially worries that people might conclude it is some sort of cult. Not only is there no charismatic leader -- it's tough pinning titles on anyone who lives there -- but its residents also have no interest in spreading anything that resembles gospel. Not even New Age, which they view as poppycock.

"What we're doing works for us," Barry Creighton said. "If it happened to work for somebody else, that would be OK too. We're not religious in the sense that we think we have some better way to live."

The name **Ionia** is derived from an ancient culture born in the Greek islands that was said to be the birthplace of scientific thought. The modern-day **Ionia Inc.** is constantly questioning, asking itself what works and what doesn't. Its grain experiment arose from that process.

"This is a group of people who found a focus and they're doing healthy things around it," said Wolf, medical director at Providence Alaska Medical Center.

"Barry came in and said, 'We're probably doing all right but need somebody to tell us.' That really has determined our relationship," he said. Wolf still conducts a monthly **community** group session.

"We don't have any rules, but we talk a lot," Cathy Creighton said. Morning meetings for the adults easily can last four hours, and nothing is done unless the group reaches consensus.

"What they're doing is so all-encompassing in a way," said David Creighton, 24-year-old son of Barry and Cathy Creighton. The younger Creighton was calling from a cell phone aboard a 90-foot yacht docked in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., where he works as a first mate.

He said he wants to travel for a few years, then eventually return to **Ionia** -- or to "context," as residents call it -- to settle down.

"They've devoted their entire lives to creating a little children's paradise," he said. "That's really the motivation behind the thing, re-creating a village mentality that's kind of been lost."

**Ionia's** families home-school their children and say they try to encourage them to do what most interests them. "They somehow instilled responsibility, even in the young kids," David Creighton said. He said it's probably because **Ionia's** children think of themselves as part of a group and therefore consider how they fit and how they affect the broader village.

The village approach to raising children and leading simple, low-tech lives takes its cue from groups like the Mennonites and Amish. The elder Creighton spent a few months living in a Mennonite village in

Pennsylvania and said he admires the way such communities work together. So **Ionia** borrowed the idea.

But the group didn't take the horse-and-buggy Amish dogma or what Creighton described as Mennonites' strict Christian culture. There's no religious component to **Ionia**, and residents have nothing against technology. Next to their hand-driven wooden wash tubs are decidedly modern personal computers, often hidden from view by children playing video games or surfing the Internet.

Each home has a TV monitor and a VCR and shelves of videotapes. Movies, whether on tape or in the theater, are a central part of the social life, Creighton said. His shelf holds popular Hollywood movies ranging from "Ace Ventura" to "Taxi Driver." But there's no satellite dish or antennas poking from the roofs because **Ionia** residents abhor the idea of a television or radio barrage. They didn't bother to install toilets, opting for the simple Alaska outhouse. "They use what they want to use," Wolf said. "It's very interesting. They live very simply, but a few years ago they developed their own intranet between the houses down there."

## IT ALWAYS COMES BACK TO FOOD

The **community's** tall tepees stand smartly and drum-tight with their tops about the height of the surrounding trees, wood smoke drifting from some of the cone tops. One functions as the summer cook house, with a central fire pit warming a pot of water and six propane stoves heating pressure cookers.

It always comes back to food at **Ionia**.

The mainstays at the dinner table were born of the 1960s health-food craze. But Creighton said the group isn't eating that way for philosophical reasons. It's just that a diet of whole grains, beans and vegetables made them feel better, so they began working with it.

"We are profoundly sensitive to food in ways that other people aren't," Cathy Creighton said. Meats, fats, dairy products, honey, syrups and spices -- anything that requires processing or reducing -- are out. "We tend not to eat concentrated food," she said.

For breakfast, children may eat a bowl of cooked whole oats topped with sesame seeds. Lunch and dinner, often eaten communally, might be a deceptively simple seaweed soup with a side of brown rice, boiled vegetables like leeks, broccoli and carrots.

On any given night, a few women may be quietly preparing the next day's meals while children, shrieking and running about, bounce on trampolines and take turns slipping into a wood-heated hot tub.

A short walk away are the six log homes where most of the residents spend winter. The homes are viewed with pride; the families had to learn how to build them.

### ATTEMPTING THE IMPOSSIBLE

Despite their self-imposed separation, **Ionía** residents increasingly are becoming part of the surrounding **community**.

This spring, **Ionía** won support from the Alaska Science & Technology Foundation, Alaska Conservation Foundation, Alaska Mental Health Land Trust and a private foundation called Firecatcher **Inc.** to help pay for a \$60,000 tractor that's tilling the thin topsoil that lies atop Kasilof's deep glacial sand.

**Ionía** wants to test some 40 strains of hardy northern grains, found in places like Norway and the Himalayas, to see if they grow well in Southcentral Alaska's short, often soggy summers. The state wants to know if it will work too, which is why the science foundation invested \$24,500 in the project.

"If it works, it's a good thing for the state and for them," said Jim Palin, the foundation's grants administrator. State researchers say growing grain in Alaska has been tried before, but nobody has come up with a commercially successful seed stock that's good for anything better than animal feed. Tom Jahns, a University of Alaska Cooperative Extension agent keeping tabs on the grain experiment, said he has managed limited success growing feed grains. "I'd give them 30 to 50 percent odds, somewhere around there," he said. "I'm not aware of any cereals grown for human consumption on the Kenai Peninsula."

The chance of finding a seed that grows a marketable crop of Alaska-grown organic wheat is "a low probability, but it could work," Creighton conceded. **Ionia** is taking its single-minded, questioning approach to the project, which just might tip the balance, he said.

For example, instead of clearing a field with a bulldozer, which can be done in an afternoon, **Ionia** uses its tractor to uproot individual trees. Then Creighton and the others tap precious soil from the roots. They also have plans to use a powerful chipper to mulch the roots.

**Ionia** residents say they're convinced they will eventually come up with something they can use. They're more motivated than most people, they say, because they're growing food that they see as critical to their health.

"Somehow we're going to find a way to have this grain grow," Creighton said. By mid-August, he said, the field had been transformed into a wave of grain and three of the experimental stocks showed promise: Two types of barley, Tibetan and excelsior and Ladoga wheat from Canada.

In many ways, Creighton said, the effort to raise crops in an unforgiving climate mirrors **Ionia's** struggles to find a place to live. Its residents don't pay too much attention to criticism.

"We're used to that," Becherer said. Then he recited a quote they've all heard many times: "Only those who attempt the absurd achieve the impossible."

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