

# Mile high club

Rich Warren infiltrates a group that stands up for the diminutively challenged

by Rich Warren

Don't even think about calling me short. And I'm not "vertically challenged" either. At five-feet, six-inches (and yes, I *did* round up), I prefer to think of myself as diminutive. And most certainly tall on the inside.

I've heard all the snide comments, ranging from the very rude ("shrimp," "pee wee," "half-pint") to the very condescending (including my personal favorite, "big guy"). I've seen people a head taller than me gaze right over me as if I were invisible. Even my own mother bought me clothes a couple sizes too large until I was in my late 20s, figuring that, like her brother, I was going to be a "late bloomer." I actually rejoiced the day she looked at me and, in kind of a reverse blessing, declared, "You've stopped growing." I knew I would finally get form-fitting clothes for Christmas.

In this very heightist society we live in, I've finally learned that whoever has a problem with my lack of stature is the one with the problem, not me. I'm at peace with my low altitude.

Or so I thought—until the day I read about the High Society Club, a local organization for men six-feet, two-inches and taller, and women taller than five-feet, 10-inches.

Let's just say a button got pushed. "Why that's discrimination!" was the first thing that flew out of my mouth, followed closely by "Who do they think they are?" I started grousing out loud, threatening to form organizations like "The Last Shall Be First Club," an organization of people whose names are at the end of the alphabet and who always get

called on last. Just let those Adams and Bailey people try to get in!

What, these tall people think they've got problems? How *awful* it must be for them to duck in low doorways! Secretly I suspected they were just a bunch of short-haters, the ones who jeer at me when I'm foolish enough to play basketball.

And so on I fussed and fumed and finally I decided to crash one of their meetings.

At first I planned to saunter in and tell them I was height dyslexic—six-feet, five-inches, and not the opposite—or that I had once been tall but had been left in the dryer too long. I considered trying something that my hero Lucy might have done, walking in on stilts and a very long trench coat. In the end, though, I decided simply to pose as a roving reporter for *Columbus Alive*. After I'd disarmed them with my charm, I would whip out my notebook and snarl, "OK, what's wrong with short people?"

I called up their number and reached a very informative man named George. I was surprised to learn our local High Society Club is one of 54 similar organizations across the country with colorful names like the Tip Toppers, the Higher Ups and the Skyliners. There are even affiliated clubs in Europe, some with even taller height requirements. These groups have been around since 1938, when a very tall California artist, weary of the lack of leg room on buses and of drawing dwarves for Disney, decided there should be a club for tall people.

Nowadays, they're primarily social organ-

izations with a variety of outings each month, and even regional and national conventions. Many of the groups get involved in public services. Their avowed purpose is to "promote tall awareness," as though anyone would have trouble spotting a bunch of giants walking around like a pack of giraffes grazing from treetops.

Finally, I wrangled from George an invitation to the group's monthly meeting at a Worthington restaurant. His helpfulness was starting to soften me, though, so I disclosed my height to him. We both chuckled, agreeing that we shouldn't have any trouble spotting each other.

When I arrived that evening, most of the tall ones were already there, appearing ominously large even seated, looking a bit like adults around a kiddy table. I braced myself for stifled giggles or mirthful sideways glances, but they were lovely people—very welcoming and inclusive—with hospitality radiating in waves.

They graciously answered my probably very impertinent questions. Yes, they do have problems. Like me, they have trouble finding clothing, but an even greater challenge is fitting inside an average-sized car. One man's immensely tall uncle solved the problem by removing the front seat of a compact car and driving it from the rear.

They too get snippy comments: "How's the air up there?" or (for the women) "Do you only date guys taller than you?" But they've learned to take it in their very long stride—with humor (describing themselves as five-feet, 18-inches, for example) or by turning the table on condescending questioners. As one club member put it, "If a short person asks me if I enjoy playing basketball, I ask them if they like to play miniature golf."


Some of them self-consciously slouch when hanging out with shorter people, but most are proud of their height, aware of the advantages it brings them. "I'm glad I'm tall," said one lady. "It gets you a lot of respect. I

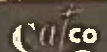
wouldn't trade it for anything else."

The Columbus group represents all ages, all walks of life, and live all over central Ohio (one man told me with a perfectly straight face he lives in the Short North). If you suspect the club might be a means for tall men and women to meet each other, you could be right. They talked at length of an absent couple whose wedding bells were on the horizon. They joked, laughed and passed around photos of other tall people that—you guessed it—had the heads chopped off. I ended up having such a rollicking good time I nearly accepted their joking nomination of me as vice president. Instead I suggested they adopt me as their mascot.

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As the group members got their business meeting under way, I took my leave, and—this is the one point in the evening I regretted—they stood to say their goodbyes. I felt more than a little Munchkin-like, especially shaking the hand of their tallest member, a jolly six-foot, seven-inch giant named Wiley. Thank God no one had a camera.

So, in short, I was thoroughly ashamed of my preconceptions of these delightful tall people. After all, we're brethren facing similar problems at opposite ends of the height continuum. If you find yourself within a centimeter or two of their lofty requirements, by all means call the High Society Club at 470-0785. Tell 'em Shorty sent ya. 

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



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