

Babies on the Green

Walking, Gawking, as Moms and Kids Stroll in Hanover

IN THE MIST OF STUDENTS LOUNGING IN THE SUN, 11 mothers and their babies rallied on the Dartmouth green one recent Wednesday afternoon. Pushing strollers, two abreast, they set out and marched up North Main Street, drawing bemused stares from passersby.

By **Martin F. Downs**

Valley News Correspondent

The moms have been raising eyebrows in Hanover since early June, when they began gathering here to walk three times a week. Over the course of the summer, their ranks have swelled from a

few acquaintances to a group that, if they were to turn out in full force, might number more than two dozen. My wife, Zara, and our 9-month-old daughter, Esme, are regular participants in the walks.

I tagged along with the procession of Combis and Gracos recently as it wound through the campus paths. Two students smoking outside the Moore Psychology Building snickered as this incongruous parade trundled by. We turned left on Clement Road, then looped around Occom Pond. Blue-haired ladies smiled and waved from passing cars.

"We're obviously entertaining to the local folk," said Laura Hercod, of Hanover, pushing 5-month-old Kate.

Returning to the green, the women circled the strollers and sat beneath the clock tower.

Out came the babies, the blankets — and the breasts. Some of the nursing moms covered up. Others dispensed with such modesty.

"We like to shock the college kids with nursing on campus," said Elisabeth Barbiero of Norwich, herself a Dartmouth graduate. "It's like, is that a breast? Yes, it is," she said, lifting her tank top to suckle her 11-month-old son, Izak. Some undergrads crossing the green looked, then quickly looked away.

Having been fed, the older babies crawled in the grass and mauled one another while the younger infants dozed.

Homemade raspberry bars and chocolate cheesecake muffins

were passed around the circle.

Amy Hearn of Lebanon organizes the walks, maintains an e-mail list and posts digital pictures online. She, like most of the women, is a new mom who left a career to care for her baby full time. Many of the women are also recent transplants to the Upper Valley.

"It's very isolating at the beginning," Hearn said of staying home with her daughter, Grace, age 5 months. She had just moved to the area from Florida and didn't know many people. But by coordinating the walks, she said, "I've made more friends than I could have ever imagined."

Members of the group initially connected at "Fourth Trimester," a weekly meeting for new mothers that the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Women's Health Resource Center hosts, though the walks are not affiliated with the center.

Hercod provided the initial spark by telling moms at Fourth Trimester she would be going for walks with Kate and that they would be welcome to join her.

"I had an idea to drink coffee on the green, and I disguised it as a walk," she said. "It was really a coffee klatch, and then people who actually wanted to walk showed up."

The walks have become an anchor for the women who participate. Not all of them live conveniently close to Hanover. Kristie Upton, for one, drives 40 miles from her home Sutton, N.H., with 4-month-old Alexander. "We really look forward to getting out of the house," she said.

"Doing this gives me a routine, which is huge for the new mom," Barbiero said.

What's more, the women have established a baby-sitting co-op. Anyone may call on the others for baby-sitting as long as she is willing to reciprocate. There has also been talk of playgroups when the kids get older, and a book club.

The moms will likely remain a fixture on weekdays in Hanover. They intend to keep walking until winter weather forces them indoors, and plan to re-emerge next spring.

"We're obviously entertaining to the local folk."

Laura Hercod of Hanover



Kristian Nowak of Norwich and her baby Skylar Takacs, left, give Maggie Welch of Lyme a lesson on how to use a pouch for her daughter, Lily. Jessica Dill of Claremont is at right.