

Wearing their virility yearly

Pair started winter 'Bearduary,' and the male ritual is growing

By Billy Baker
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In the winter of 2004, Chris Rubino decided to grow a beard. A 31-year-old graphic designer from Hanson, Rubino says he was not seeking a lifestyle change or a new aesthetic; he simply wanted to see if he could do it.

Three years later, Rubino, who now lives in New York, is a leader of an emerging, tongue-in-cheek annual event called Bearduary, which encourages men to grow a beard during the months of January and February to experience their follicle potential. Hundreds are expected to participate in "Bearduary 2007," mostly in the Northeast, along with small pockets in Kentucky and Oregon. This year will also see the opening of the first official international chapter, Bearduary Belfast, created by two lecturers at the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland who discovered Bearduary on the Internet.

It's quite a spurt for the self-described "ad absurdum" movement, born when Rubino and his first beard ran into an old college friend, Sean Donnelly, who says he was shocked and jealous of Rubino's accomplishment. "I have a bunch of hippie uncles who have these huge, burly beards, but I never thought I'd have that ability," said Donnelly, a 32-year-old from Providence who is also a graphic designer. "But when Chris was able to pull it off, I wanted to

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Sean Donnelly (left) and Chris Rubino, old college friends, started a winter beard-growing group.

'Bearduary': One thing just for men

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try, so we decided to do it together the following winter."

On Jan. 1, 2005, Rubino and Donnelly put away their razors, set a time frame (Jan. 1 to Feb. 28), came up with a clever name for the event, and let nature take its course. Bearduary has been growing ever since. "Everywhere we went, people were just in awe of our beards," said Donnelly, "and all our friends got jealous and said they wanted to be a part of Bearduary."

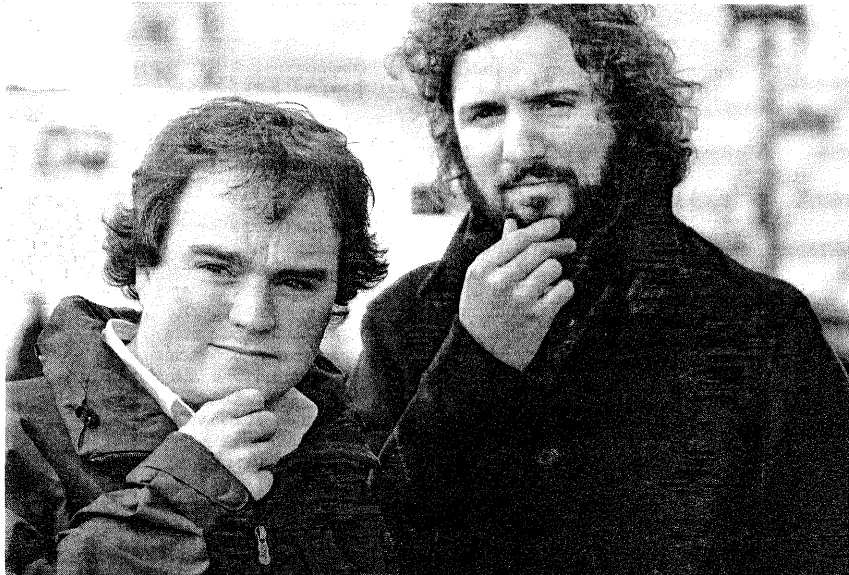
The two created a website, bearduary.com, and a slogan: "In times of inclement weather when the wind bites and snarls, the landscape turns into bleak unforgiving tundra, and the sun sets before the start of happy hour, a true gentleman grows a beard." About 40 people signed up to participate and post weekly photos of their growth the first year.

Michael Wilson, 30, a writer from Marion who is an old friend of Rubino's, even created a Bearduary chapter in the Hamptons on Long Island, where he was working for a magazine (and where the writer John Steinbeck held beard-growing competitions in the '60s).

Bearduary 2006 happened to coincide with what style-watchers had crowned the year of the beard. Rubino and Donnelly both live in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, the big dormitory of hipsterdom, where beards became so prevalent among the fashion forward — "Beards were the new tattoo," Donnelly said — that a term, "Riker," was coined to describe a hipster with a beard. The name takes its inspiration from William Riker, the bearded first officer of the Starship Enterprise on the "Star Trek: The Next Generation" television show.

Beards are, of course, nothing new. They have long been associated with virility, wisdom, and overt masculinity. (William Shakespeare, the great bearded bard, wrote that, "He that hath no beard is less than a man.") But in the era of the safety razor, beards have largely disappeared from the American mainstream, surviving in specific cultures as an extra layer of warmth (no fisherman costume is complete without the long, white beard) or a symbol of nonconformity (think bikers and revolutionaries).

The reason for the mainstream resurgence of the beard is unclear, but some fashion pundits say it is a reaction to the overly manicured trend that Madison Avenue pushed a few years ago when "metrosexual" and "manscaping" entered the lexicon. Patrick Grenham, the lead singer for the Boston-based "rhythm and noise" band The Keys to the Streets of Fear, accents his slim-fitting designer suits with a burly, lumberjack beard. "I grew the beard because I was tired of all these skinny indie rockers who look like



GEORGE RIZER/GLOBE STAFF

Sean Donnelly (left) is about to start his beard and Chris Rubino is already on track. They grow them only in the winter and enjoy comparing notes with other "Bearduary" participants.

little girls," said Grenham, 29. "I want to look like I can steal your girlfriend."

That could be a problem. Studies have shown that only 2 to 3 percent of women find a full beard "sexy."

Phil Olsen, who captained Beard Team USA at the World Beard and Mustache Championships in Berlin in 2005, said women are the main barriers to the beard revolution.

"In animal species, the males have the more brightly colored coats and feathers, and the females have a more drab appearance," said Olsen, 57, a semiretired attorney from Lake Tahoe, Calif., who sports a 14-inch Garibaldi-style beard. "In human appearance, what men have that women don't is a beard. My theory is that all men instinctively want to have beards, but women are jealous so they require men to shave them off."

Bearduary participants report positive feedback from their lady friends, but only up to a point.

Sage Goodwin, 29, a therapist in Providence, was reluctant when her husband, Mathew Goodwin, 30, announced his intention to participate last year. "My big concern was the mustache," she said. "Kissing is not as pleasurable as when he's clean-shaven." The couple reached a no-mustache compromise, and he grew a beard that was so ridiculous (he is bald on top, and his friends called his beard "the chinstrap") that this year she is actually encouraging him to go with a full beard.

"If he proves he can pull it off, then I'm willing to let him make it an annual thing," Goodwin said. "But I get final approval."

How much beard can the average man grow in two months? Donnelly says that most people are surprised by the result. "People look at a beard and think it takes years to grow, but by March 1st you can usually have a nice, full, trim beard, like Kenny Rog-

ers," he said.

Much of the appeal, according to Bearduary participants, is in sharing a solitary experience with a group of men.

"There aren't too many men-only things anymore," said Wilson. "Even men's clubs have women in them now. But this becomes like this group performance piece. It's a very personal thing to go through, but the coolest part of Bearduary is the community. We'll get together in a bar, and there will be 30 guys with beards, and there's all sorts of different things happening with the way their beards grow, how they connect, how they groom. It's like experiencing your friends for the first time. And you learn about yourself in the process. I never knew I had red hair until I grew my beard out. And it was super nappy, which really surprised me."

Many Beardurians say the hardest part about wearing a beard — other than the itchiness of the first few weeks — is figuring out where to shave your neck, which they refer to as "the decision." Fortunately for Rubino, his family has expertise in this area of beard sculpting. In the 1970s, his father, Charles Rubino, 59, was the only person in the engineering department at Gillette who wore a full beard. When the employees were called to the shaving room each afternoon to test new razors, he simply trimmed around the neckline.

There are no rules to Bearduary, which goes into hibernation, more or less, the rest of the year. Participants, who may join by e-mailing their intention to mustache@bearduary.com, can trim and style as they please, and don't have to shave on March 1. But the temporal nature is part of the appeal for many.

"When you shave at the end, it's this really weird feeling," said Rubino. "You look in the mirror, and there's this young stranger."