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Matchmaker, matchmaker ... make me a match

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LUCKILY for Adam and Eve, God was around to play matchmaker when Adam tired of the singles scene.

These days, with 100 million singles in America, the likelihood of finding your soulmate is much better than in Adam's time. Still, you may wish for divine intervention.

Fortunately, matchmaking, one of the world's oldest professions, is still around. And if you have the money to spend and are willing to put your heart in someone else's hands, you might find your love connection.

The proliferation of Internet dating services has lured potential clients away, but there are still a few matchmaking professionals in the Bay Area offering old-fashioned, face-to-face, personalized love assistance.

You know, the kind you saw

celebrated in movies such as "Fiddler on the Roof," "Crossing Delancey" and "The Matchmaker" and on TV in "Miss Match."

Some cultures in Africa and Southeast Asia still stick to the old ways of arranging marriages. In Judaism, the tradition goes back to the time of Abraham. Old-timers will remind you that arranging three marriages reserves your spot in heaven.

Each year a few thousand Bay Area singles cast their fate with a matchmaker.

"It's just hard to meet people if you don't want to hang out in bars," says Deborah, a 45-year-old Realtor who didn't want her last name published.

"Friends always set you up, but that's limited. I'd never do the Internet. It's too anonymous. And the guys aren't anything like they say they are."

The personal ads are a crap shoot. The Internet spawns more horror stories than tales of hope.

No wonder some think it better to bank on professionals to do the dirty work and grease the path to happily ever after.

Time-efficient love

Matchmakers, who have seen a jump in clientele from the baby boomer generation, find out who you are and what you want. Then they screen possible matches from their databases, narrow that group and present you with a variety of potential mates.

All for the cost of an arm and a leg. Their fees can range from hundreds to thousands of dollars, but can you really put a price on love?

"You pay any which way," says Eva Staffaf, who is enrolled in a matchmaking service. "If you go out to bars to meet people, it costs money, time and effort. (With a matchmaker), you save time. For me, time is very valuable. If you meet through the Internet or a blind date from a friend, you have to sit through a whole night, and that's a waste of money.

"I'm outgoing," says the 40-something Staffaf, who splits time between Marin and Sweden, where she sells air time for a TV station. "I have no problem meeting people. I just have a problem meeting the right kind of people."

Time is short, and people such as Staffaf and Deborah are too busy working to have much of a social life.

The two are clients of Kelleher & Associates, which, along with Introductions by Marsha and CheckMates, is among the longest-tenured matchmaking firms in the Bay Area.

Although the businesses lack concrete data, each claims to have been responsible for between 200 and 400 marriages through the years and countless long-term relationships. From anecdotal evidence, the number that ended in divorce in each was fewer than five — well below the national divorce rate of 50 percent.

Each firm is operated by someone with a background in psychology, experience pairing people, and a belief in romantic love.

A top priority

"I really think the most important thing in one's lifetime is finding the right person to spend your life with," says Jill Kelleher, founder and president of Kelleher & Associates, which has

offices in Mill Valley, Santa Monica, Scottsdale, Ariz., Dallas and New York.

Among the higher-priced spreads, her firm charges

\$5,500 for Bay Area clients,

\$10,000 to \$25,000 if they want her to conduct a multi-city search for prospective love matches.

"We work personally with each client so they don't have to do any of it, and just meet people," says Kelleher, who has been in business since 1985. "We screen our clients and meet every single one in person — which is unlike the Internet, where people misrepresent themselves, and you don't know if they're telling the truth."

(In 2002, a survey concluded that 30 percent of the people looking for matches online were already married.)

Kelleher's clients range in age from 26 to 58, are single, divorced or widowed. At present she has 3,000, 800 of whom live in the Bay Area.

She makes a copy of each client's driver's license and records their social security number. If someone misrepresents himself or herself, the contract is voided.

Perhaps because of the \$5,500 investment, that has not yet happened, she says.

Kelleher, who grew up in Lafayette and Orinda, starts each potential client with a 1 1/2-hour free interview.

Similar to interviews conducted by the other services, this consists of identifying the seeker's values, goals, personality, energy, relationship experiences and such, and ascertaining what they are looking for in a mate.

If what they want is not realistic, she says, using a 59-year-old man who wants to meet a 29-year-old woman as an example, she won't take them on.

Kelleher also insists her clients be non-smokers and physically fit, financially secure and happy with their lives.

Why non-smokers? "Nobody smokes and nobody will date a smoker," she says.

Kelleher deals primarily with professionals. Like the clients of other area matchmaking firms, they are usually college educated, but that is not a requirement.

The fee buys a membership that generally lasts 1 1/2 years, although it can be put on hold while someone is in a relationship and continue later — for up to three years, as a kind of insurance in case the relationship fizzles.

Each client is guaranteed to meet a minimum of eight people.

How it works

From her database, Kelleher finds about 200 people who fit the client's criteria. She hones that group to about 20. Then she picks the one person she believes will be the best match.

Kelleher gets consent from both parties before any contact is made. Unlike online dating services and other matchmakers, she does not take photos of her clients. So, the pairing depends on blind trust.

If everything is a go, she gives the man the woman's phone number — even if it's the woman who is looking for love. "We're old-fashioned," she says, "he always calls her."

Most people meet for dinner. After each date, both clients return feedback forms indicating how it went, what worked and what didn't. This further helps refine the process — and indicates whether there was any interest in a second date.

Through the forms and verbal feedback, Kelleher learns whether her clients shot themselves in the foot by acting negative, self-absorbed, overly nervous or disinterested in the other person.

One of Staffaf's dates was a nice guy she had fun with. But, she says, he moved a little too fast, and she felt like she was rushed, feedback that no doubt helped him in future dates.

"There was definitely chemistry there," she says, "but it wasn't like, 'whoa.'"

Deborah met three men before finding the man who became her husband.

"The first guy I met was just really neat, so I saw him for a while, . . . but I was not completely sold," she says. "Then I met another guy at one of her parties, and he was kind of neat."

John entered her life on the fourth go-round.

"Jill called me up at work and said, 'I've got the guy for you. He's just wonderful. He's a dentist,'" Deborah says. "I said, 'Tell me more about him.' She said, 'I can't. He's gonna call you in a couple of minutes.'"

"He and I laughed on the phone for about half an hour. We had lunch, flew kites, really big ones. . . . He swept me off my feet.

"I would never have met the guy I did if I hadn't signed up. He lives in Sacramento. The odds of our meeting were like Lotto. If you don't play you don't win. At least it ups your chances. I owe Jill bigtime."

Hanging in there

Dave, a San Mateo mortgage broker who didn't want his last name published, signed up with CheckMates and went out with three of its clients before striking gold.

"The others were not quite the personality type I was looking for," he says. "Nothing clicked."

Like so many singles, he was looking for someone with similar values and qualities, "who fit my profile and who was serious about having a relationship."

He found the woman of his dreams on the fourth try.

"She picked me," Dave, 47, says. "She came into the service later. Then Carole (Shattil, founder of CheckMates) called me and said she thought she had someone who was a pretty good match. She gave her a little background on me. I didn't even see a picture. We went out for coffee and that turned into . . . another date. (She was) the whole package, personality, sense of humor, looks."

Now they're a couple.

"I always say you can't microwave a relationship," says Shattil, who has been making matches for 15 years. "You have to give it time. It's like the three-date rule: If you have a neutral response to people, give them at least two more dates."

Coaching success

Matchmakers often find themselves in a role of teaching people how to be more comfortable in dating situations.

For instance, Shattil spent the other night having dinner with a client, then taking him shopping.

"He's an older client and hadn't updated his wardrobe in about 10 years," says Shattil, whose firm has offices in San Francisco, Mountain View and Walnut Creek. "When he came to my office, everything he had on was mismatched and outdated. And I said, 'You're not going to wear that on a date.' So I needed to give him a lecture on what women want and how to date..."

Newly divorced or widowed, some people have been out of the dating game for so long they have forgotten how to play. Others are simply shy.

"I do more role-playing, more coaching with my clients before the date if I need to," Shattil says. "I hand-hold closely and give them feedback."

If she gets comments from a client's date that he or she was "too stiff in personality," Shattil gives them tips on how to be more open the next time.

She also checks everyone's backgrounds.

"I check driver's licenses, do background checks, Google people if I need to. You need to have someone see if there's any addiction or drug use," she says.

Nuts and bolts

Shattil says she averages about 2,500 clients and 20 marriages a year. Her rates range from \$2,500 to \$5,000.

Clients are guaranteed a minimum of 12 matches, one per month. The more expensive packages provide more matches.

Her clients range in age from 27 to 62. The process begins with an hourlong interview, for which there is no charge.

Clients fill out a profile, then are shown photos of other clients to get an idea of what physical type they are attracted to.

Initially, Shattil pulls at least 20 possible candidates' photos and profiles. Intuition often factors in.

"I'll highly recommend people based on what I feel about them," she says. "If they pick someone, and I think it's the wrong person, I'll tell them why."

If they picked someone just on looks and not on personality and other qualities, odds are they won't match, she says.

After they meet, the rest is up to them.

"Their choices are their own," Shattil says. "I'm like a mediator in the whole process. I can't guarantee marriages or relationships. I can't guarantee that the date will like them back. But no one leaves the service without liking someone."

Mom and pop

Marsha Winer, who operates Introductions by Marsha and The Jewish Connection, got the matchmaking bug from her parents.

"I always had a fascination and core belief that love conquers all," the Mill Valley resident says. "My mom and dad have been married for 64 years. For as long as I can remember, their love for each other was firm and steadfast. . . . My dad still says, 'Look how pretty your mom is. Look how pretty her eyes are.' . . . I always had this hope for all good people (to be like that)."

Winer has been in business since 1983. She has approximately 120 clients, most 40 or older

— "a small, select group," she says. "We're a mom-and-pop little store."

She charges between \$1,600 and \$3,000, with special rates for nonprofits, teachers and students. A one-hour consult in her San Francisco office costs \$65.

She shows prospective customers photos of her client base so they can decide if they want to pay the full amount.

"I meet everybody, I arrange everybody," she says. "I don't arrange their dates but I match them. . . . I tell them about (possible matches), say . . . 'I think she'd be good for you.'"

Each client gets a year membership, and, after Winer "assesses the situation and sees who is appropriate for them," the client is guaranteed a minimum of six to eight introductions. There is no maximum.

Winer won't take a client if she doesn't have people who match what he or she is looking for.

She says that while most women prefer the man to call, she advises them to do what's comfortable.

Oren, a Martinez banker, says hiring Winer was "by far the best money I ever spent."

Thirty-five and divorced, he found that living in the suburbs made it more difficult to meet people. He had attended some singles events in San Francisco, but that didn't work out.

"I told Marsha I was looking for someone attractive, college-educated, pretty generic sort of descriptions," Oren says. "And I think she got a feel for what I was like in terms of my personality and preferences."

Oren met the right woman after going on dates with 20 others first.

"I think we saw that we were similar-type people, our personalities were and are compatible," he says. "Today is our fourth anniversary, and we have a 13-month-old daughter."

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