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Eight minutes to find true love

Column by *The Post's* David Wecker

Forty-five bachelors and an almost equal number of single women, all wearing tags with their first names and three-digit numbers, line up for drinks at BB Riverboats. Each has paid \$35 for a chance to meet at least eight prospective date-ees.

Joe 225, a 30-ish marketing executive, casts a wary eye around the room. He doesn't like the vibe.

"At this point, I'd pay 35 bucks to get out of here," he says.

Ah, the single life -- the tragic opening lines, the unreturned phone calls, the rejection, cold shoulders and lonely Saturday nights spent wondering, "What's *wrong* with me?"

It's harder to be single in Cincinnati than almost anywhere else, says Susan Valentine, the organizer of this evening's event.

"If you grew up here, you're married to your high school sweetheart," she says.

"If you didn't, good luck."

All of which makes Cincinnati a meaty market for Ms. Valentine (her real name). The occasion is a night out with 8minutedating.com, a national Web-based service that gives singles a different way to break through the rock-hard crust of other-gender acceptance.

What you get is eight minutes of uninterrupted schmooze time, then you move to another table for another eight minutes with someone else -- eight mini "dates" in all, plus whatever conversations you strike up during breaks in the action.

"It's a face-to-face chat room," says Ms. Valentine's helper, Christian Kidwell.

After the event, if Cecil 536 wants to see more of Agnes 698, he makes it known to the Cupids at the Web site, who fire off a note to Agnes. If Agnes is interested, she sends Cecil an e-mail.

The only couple in attendance turns out to be one of Ms. Valentine's success stories. Kristen Ingalls, a music teacher at White Oak Middle School, and Mike Poast, owner of an Internet sales business, met at a similar event at Dave & Buster's. It was her first event, his second.

"For the girls, it's a nice setup," Mike says. "No last names, just numbers. It's very secure."

Jayne 442, a 32-year-old SWPF pulling down \$50,000 a year as a research program director, was not so sure:

"A lot of times, I'm approached by married men or men who aren't married but are immature. That's just in everyday life.

"But even at these events, you have to be careful. I've been to a handful of so-called singles dances sponsored by other organizations where I met a guy and dated him for a month.

"Until I started getting calls from his wife."

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Phil 560, a 42-year-old Realtor from Boone County, allowed as to how he's played the field as far as dating services go:

"Everything from the personals in the backs of tabloids to Internet to this, which is about the latest thing.

"There's another service like this, except it's a three-minute date. Shorter, but you get more of them per event. Personally, I prefer the more leisurely pace of 8minutedating-dot-com."

First impressions are everything -- although there are some in this crowd, most of them men, who may have confused rugged individuality with sticking out like a swollen thumb. What was the guy in the big black cowboy hat and black duster thinking? Elsewhere, a hairpiece cries out to be put back in its place, on top of its wearer's head.

But wait a minute. Who do I think I am? I've allowed myself to be sucked into the vortex of sizing up people based on appearances. I realize I would not be a good single person. The epiphany gives me new respect for my brother bachelors and sister bachelorettes.

The dating begins, and 45 sets of men and women encounter each other for the first time with all the finesse of a puppy walking on a beach ball. Within minutes, some seem to be clicking, filling the air with conversation. But most falter out of the gate. You see them glancing at their watches, their eyes darting this way and that, their feet moving out from beneath their tables, ready to move on.

By the end of the evening, Joe 225 has "parlez-vous'ed" with two attorneys, two journalists, a woman in public relations, an event coordinator and two others he doesn't remember.

"There were two girls I thought were nice that I could handle seeing again," he says.

"But was either of them The One? No."

Publication Date: 02-14-2004



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