

Time-strapped call on Cupid

Old-fashioned matchmaker comes to rescue of career-focused individuals

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As if building a career isn't demanding enough, without trying to find a love connection of life partner. And if you think looking on the Internet is the answer, don't forget you'll have to vet all the people you date, on your own.

Linda Miller, a professional cupid based in Carlton Place outside of Ottawa just maybe the real-life equivalent to Will Smith's character in the Hollywood film, Hitch. She is quietly and confidentially pairing professionals, celebrities and other career-immersed candidates with, potentially, the loves of their lives.

She runs her matchmaking service, Misty River Introductions, the old-fashioned way, meeting her clients in person to assess their personality and preferences, which in this day and age of Internet dating she touts as a "safer, saner alternative."

"I can figure people out pretty quickly," says Ms. Miller. "I've always had a great interest in people. They fascinate me."

Ms. Miller cites statistics that show Internet dating is dropping off, with Pew Internet & American Life Project's report on the impact of the Web on families finding 43% of adults who've tried Internet dating consider it risky.

Clients pay Misty River a \$1,200 registration fee, then meet Ms. Miller or one of her trusted staffers at a restaurant or hotel lobby. Ms. Miller has clients in Ontario, Quebec and New York State, and travels regularly to meet upward of 50 candidates individually in each jurisdiction per trip.

Her mission is to both assess the personality of each client to ensure a good match, as well as serve as a security screener. "I do all the things you hate to do on a date," she explains.

"I say 'OK let's see your driver's licence, let's see another piece of ID' and I can say, 'Why isn't your address the same here as it is here, why don't you have a home phone number, why can't we call you at work?'"

"We're not going to call you at work and say 'Hey it's Misty River', but we're going to call and say 'Jack, is that you? You work there?' and make sure [the client is] approximately who they purport themselves to be," she says.



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"It's all the stuff you'd love to do but can't when you're on a date because you're on your best behaviour. But I'm not on my best behaviour."

Since launching her service 14 years ago, Ms. Miller has enlisted 5,000 clients, largely working professionals including physicians, politicians, television broadcasters and entrepreneurs, most of whom have been divorced or widowed, some of whom are retired. In her handout material she warns "jobless basement dwellers with dodgy backgrounds need not apply. Misty River won't accept their money."

Once a candidate qualifies, Ms. Miller provides telephone contact information for a potential suitor. If the individuals don't hit it off on the phone, she provides another contact.

Clients are encouraged to have several phone conversations before arranging to meet to ensure suitability as the fee expires after in-person meetings with three different candidates.

"There are always people I can't match," she admits although she estimates she successfully pairs between 70% and 75% of her clients into long-term relationships, even marriage.

"You are hiring a matchmaker and my area of expertise is that sometimes I know what's better for you and I'll talk you into meeting somebody who you wouldn't otherwise meet and it ends up working out great," she says.

That's how it worked out for Anna Larsen and Mike Dupuis. Ms. Larsen signed up stating she preferred a non-smoker; Mr. Dupuis smokes. Mr. Dupuis signed up stating he preferred a partner with no children; Ms. Larsen has two.

They met through Misty River on Sept. 1, 2005, and were married a year and a day later.

Ms. Larsen, who was widowed, works in retail that includes shifts during the evenings and weekends. "Where do you go to meet somebody? It just wasn't happening," she says.

Ms. Miller provided her with Mr. Dupuis' profile. "We talked a few times on the phone then decided to meet.

"He cooked me an elegant eight-course dinner, it was very romantic, he had red roses in a vase that said 'welcome Anna', it was very impressive," she says of their first get-together.

The couple live in London, Ont., and are in the midst of building a larger home to accommodate their new family.

Then there is Clifford Lam. He owns a successful technology company and had no time for dating. He met Lianne Mercier through Misty River in 2000.

"Even though Internet dating is the big thing now, I don't think it's the best way to find a suitable match assuming you're in it to find a long-term relationship," says Mr. Lam, noting there's no screening process through Web-based dating. "My time is valuable."

Ms. Mercier is a financial advisor and similarly had little free time to socialize. "I really appreciated being able to talk on the phone first, get to know them a bit," she says of fielding Misty River prospects before arranging to meet with Mr. Lam.

They married three years after meeting and make their home in Ottawa with their two dogs.

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