

A Valentine for the disabled

London-based website helps make connections to overcome isolation

By BEN BENEDICT The Londoner

Louise Maxwell, the founder of Soulful Encounters, an online meeting place for disabled Londoners, holds a recent copy of Abilities Magazine that features an article on the site.

BEN BENEDICT PHOTO



Living with a disability has its challenges but not the ones most of us would think of first, like moving readily around our community for example.

More often than not the biggest obstacle to securing a so-called 'normal life' is isolation and a lack of available resources - like someone to love who loves you back or even the opportunity to meet them. It gives Valentine's Day a new perspective.

Meet Louise Maxwell, of London, who at 60 has created Soulful Encounters, a website that aims to connect people who are physically and medically disabled and provide support, friendship and a love-filled community.

The site currently has more American users than Canadian for a number of reasons.

"I'm trying to get Canadians to take advantage if it," Mrs. Maxwell says. "I had a marketing professional comment that it may be the only resource of its kind in Canada. It first appeared in May 2006 but I've been working on it for a while."

By 'a while' she means a lifetime of experience and compassion along with her own story of injury and recovery. As for a why, "It goes back to a couple of reasons - I've managed medical offices for 20 years and many of the physically and cognitively challenged individuals would talk to me and I heard a lot about how they were lonely," Mrs. Maxwell says.

"They would come in and even their caregivers, when speaking to the disabled individual, would often answer for them. Many of these disabled individuals were quite intelligent and they welcomed the interaction."

It is this level of detailed attention and our changing social fabric that was a driver also.

"It goes back 40 years. If you were born disabled at that time you were expected to live alone and be lonely. People would talk around and over you. I always had a compassion for the disabled and they opened up to me," Mrs. Maxwell says. "Even as a young person at that time in my early 20s it hit me that what a different world they live in."

Then a car accident put her life in the same context as those she had cared for and about.

"When I was 30 I had back surgery and it went well but I re-injured it at 35 while living in Saudi Arabia travelling by jeep trying to keep my four-month-old infant son safe. It took about 18 months to get upright enough to return home," Mrs. Maxwell says. "The last time I was in hospital it was a six-month stay. I've had five major and three minor back surgeries so I can identify with those who are physically incapacitated. I can't walk for or sit long and I have a lot of neuropathic pain. My husband had a hard time dealing with my ability to be mobile because he's a very active individual."

Members of the Soulful Encounters website include a poet, a writer, a psychologist, a gourmet chef, a girl who does beautiful silk flower arrangements and an expert in mental health issues amongst many others. While the site and its clients ask able-bodied Londoners to reconsider how they view less the able-bodied members, it also raises serious issues that as a community, many are not prepared to deal with.

Azure, a Soulful Encounters user in her mid-20s writes: "My big issue with sexuality and the disabled has always been we have the right to be proud sexual beings. Many times the disabled feel or are raised to be asexual. Objects of pity not lust. Due to often isolated independent existences. . . . This attitude needs to change. That's what your site is for!"

Another Soulful Encounters client is Chad McClinchey, 26, born with dystonia, a movement disorder that causes the muscles to contract and spasm involuntarily. He's also bright, funny and a major sports fan. However, like many with a physical disability, he lacks an adequate social life.

As an adult he feels sexually frustrated while at the same time acknowledging many of the people he meets online "are odd and often want to meet too fast." The concern is that there are individuals who are willing to prey on the loneliness and isolation of disabled individuals, perhaps for their own gratification, rather than be a supportive friend. What he would really like is for people to not "judge what you see."

Deanie McClinchey is Chad's mom and while she's supportive of her son's efforts she feels that "if he went on a date he'd have an attendant with him." She also acknowledges "everybody who meets Chad says he's intelligent, they see it in his eyes." While she wants 'normal' life for her son, she understands that like most moms that "I'm protective because he doesn't have the social experiences and I'm a social worker so I know what's involved." Then there is the lack of available social outlets and opportunities to interact for disabled individuals following their 18th birthday in Ontario. "He was very active in high school," Deanie says.

Bonnie Maas, a Soulful Encounters user and a former nurse who now volunteers with the Interpretive Learning Centre, is on London's Accessibility Advisory Committee and is co-founder of a multiple sclerosis support group.

"I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1997 and worked until 2004. My legs don't work when I have an attack. The fatigue is unbelievable; you can sleep 18 hours and still not feel rested," Ms. Maas says.

Like many who become disabled later in life, the diagnosis took a toll on her family life. Her husband wasn't able to remain supportive like Mrs. Maxwell's.

"I was married in 1991 and separated in 2000. My husband was able to cope with me for 11 years. He wanted to have children but it wasn't working for us. Then I was diagnosed with MS and was concerned what would happen to me if I had a child," Ms. Maas says.

At mid-life she now finds herself back in the dating pool but with a different outlook on life.

"I don't see the dating as being much different than normal people. You just have to take different things into account. You need to be upfront on how that can impact a friendship let alone a relationship," Ms. Maas says.

Having a resource like the Soulful Encounters website has been a blessing.

"I got my Abilities Magazine and saw the title Love Bites. Louise's website was in there. I signed up and got an email from her. We started communicating and became friends. She's an amazing woman because she recognized a need. It's a good idea and the fact that it is London is great," Ms. Maas says. "There are a lot of Londoners out there who could benefit from knowing about this website be it for chat, friendship or more. There are a lot of people sitting there and thinking I wish I had someone in my life and they don't know that there are places that are accepting."