

Website gives disabled cha

The woman refers to herself as "sweet angel." She's five-foot-three, with light brown hair and hazel eyes.

She says she likes "attending motorcycle rallies, spending time at the lake, cooking, going to movies, concerts and dancing.

"I'm looking for a guy ... who is sensitive and kind," writes the woman. "I enjoy life and would like to be with someone who also enjoys life and is open to having fun as a friend ... or a serious relationship if it comes to that."

It's the type of listing you'd see on almost any Internet dating site.

But there's a big difference; under the heading "specific

OPINION

IAN GILLESPIE



THE CITY

challenge," the woman has listed "muscular dystrophy."

And that's because this is a dating service aimed at people with mental, physical and/or medical problems.

"It doesn't matter what's wrong with you, you still want to have companionship," says Louise Maxwell, who launched the website (www.SoulfulEncounters.com)

about three weeks ago.

"There aren't too many people that don't want anyone in their lives." It's an idea that's long overdue. And Maxwell should know.

The 60-year-old London woman is herself disabled after a series of failed back operations. Her husband, Brian, is visually impaired by macular degeneration, a disease that causes the gradual deterioration of light-sensing cells in the eyes.

"I spent 10 years not even being able to leave my house," says Maxwell, whose back problems were aggravated by a car accident.

"I do leave my house now, but my endurance is very limited. I have a lot of pain

Vice to find companionship

and nothing helps it, so I'm unable to work outside of the house."

Maxwell says her disability made her realize a sad, but sobering truth: Many people assume a disabled individual lacks the physical and emotional needs of an able-bodied person.

"There are people who don't know me from before (the disability)," she says. "And because they don't know my background and what I was capable of doing, you're almost seen as if you're a little bit on the dumb side, too."

Maxwell says she also has learned that, in many ways, it often takes a disabled person to understand another disabled person.

"Sometimes you can't really explain to a person (who's not disabled) what you're going through," she says. "It's very hard. I had moments when my legs would give out and I had to pace myself. But I still had people saying, 'No, no, you're coming out with us - we'll just pull you into the car.' They have no concept of what it's really like."

Indeed, Maxwell says her own challenges have helped her understand the obstacles faced by her husband.

"Now (since his loss of vision) he loses things," she says. "Maybe if I didn't have my problems, I wouldn't be so understanding."

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DEREK RUNAN The London Free Press
BEEN THERE: Louise Maxwell's disability prompted her to set up a website to aid others.

GILLESPIE: Resource database on website

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So far, only about a dozen people have registered with Maxwell's website. But the members, whose ages range from 19 to 74, are living with a variety of afflictions, including multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, Crohn's disease and impaired

The website also features links to various resources for the disabled.

Maxwell concedes attitudes toward the disabled are changing - but there's still a way to go.

"We're slowly getting rid of some of these little hang-ups we have," she says. "But sometimes, even though disabled people can do quite a bit, they have a hard time meeting people."

But as Maxwell has discovered with her husband,

finding a like-minded and "differently abled" companion can make all the difference.

"If you're in a relationship, you're going to feel better about yourself," she says. "It just makes everything work a lot better."

Ian Gillespie's column appears Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. He can be reached at 667-4507; outside the London dialling area 1-800-265-4105, ext. 4507. E-mail him at igillespie@lfpres.com