

they have a dolphin adventure where you can go in the water with them. Then we talked about the Stat~ Fair-Kenny Rogers and the Oakridge Boys were going to be there. So in August I jumped in my car and drove to Indianapolis. My friends were all worried about me driving down by myself, and for me it was a huge leap of faith. We had a fantastic time."

Londoner Carole McFadden has no disability, so she never dreamed that she would find romance on Soulful Encounters. But she has after connecting with Kevin Saichuk, who lives in Burnaby B.C. As the parent and primary caregiver of a 25 year-old daughter with spina hydrocephalus, McFadden was simply looking for someone to talk to, someone she could relate to because their experience was similar to her daughter's. She has made a number of new friends through the website, but says, "for some reason Kevin and I clicked." The two have chatted and talked using a web cam, but have yet to meet in person. Saichuk, who has brittle bone disease, isn't fussy about flying, says McFadden, but they are hoping to meet up in Winnipeg sometime in February.

As with any Internet dating site, people need to be cautious when they meet someone online because there are a lot of scammers in cyberspace, says Maxwell. As the site's administrator, she is very protective of Soulful Encounters' members, and has put a number of filters and safeguards in place to quickly identify and eliminate scammers and spammers.

Maxwell is far more than the site's administrator, though. For many members she has become a mentor, supporter and friend. "I welcome everyone personally, and I spend a lot of time with people on the phone," says Maxwell, who takes the time to understand each person's personal situation and draw out their strengths and talents.

Maxwell first worked with people with disabilities when she was in her early twenties and on staff in a medical office. From the outset she was determined to



treat them as people first. "I made a habit of speaking directly with people with physical challenges, instead of have their parent or caregiver speak for them."

After being involved in a car accident when she was in her late thirties, Maxwell underwent eight different back surgeries. Being housebound for nearly 10 years, she experienced the isolation and frustration that many people with disabilities encounter on a daily basis.

The inspiration for Soulful Encounters came from a young woman Maxwell met who was born with no arms and had resigned herself to never having a romantic relationship. At around the same time, one of Maxwell's sons was exploring dating sites on the Internet. That planted the seed in Maxwell's mind: why not a dating site that catered specifically to people with physical disabilities? "It drives me nuts that some people think disabled people do not need physical and emotional intimacy," says Maxwell. "That's not true."

Launched in 2005, Soulful Encounters logged almost 2,400 members by 2006. That year Maxwell began to use a new website hosting company and during the transition to the new service provider she lost many of the member contacts. The website was restructured and relaunched in May, 2006, and since then has attracted over 600 members that range in age from 21 to 87, with the majority in their forties and fifties. Most are North American-more than half in the U.S.-but there are also members in

Australia, New Zealand, Egypt, France, Denmark and Sweden.

Chad McLinchey was Soulful Encounter's first member, joining in April 2005. He had been looking for websites where he could connect with people with disabilities and had not found any Canadian sites until he happened upon Maxwell's. McLinchey isn't housebound or isolated-he gets out and about on a regular basis and plays drums in a rock band-but he enjoys talking with other people with disabilities who share common experiences. And at 27, he still holds hope that he might find romance one day.

Because he has dystonia, a movement disorder that leaves him with minimal movement control, McLinchey has to rely on others to type for him and only visits Soulful Encounters about three times a week. For other members, the site is a daily lifeline that connects them to online friendships. Read the website's testimonial page and you quickly understand the impact that Soulful Encounters and Maxwell have had on their day-to-day lives. Says one member, "Louise made me feel worthy and confident ... not trapped and sad. I have never felt so good about myself in my entire life."

"Whether they date or not is secondary now," says Maxwell. "What is more important is the way they feel empowered, the way everyone is embracing each other, and the huge support system that people have developed."