



Photo: By Rachele Labrecque — Sault Star

Love on the Net

Sault Ste. Marie native Louise Maxwell is making it easier for medically disabled and differently-abled people to share their dreams

By Rachele Labrecque

Local News - Saturday, March 17, 2007 **Updated @ 1:02:24 AM**

There's no need to be a wallflower on the World Wide Web.

In fact, with just a click of a mouse, everyone can find a friend, maybe even a date.

Popular sites such as Match.com, E-Harmony, and Lava Life promote an endless list of people searching for Mr. or Ms. Right.

Although meeting your soul mate, can be another story, modern technology has made it easier for countless Canadians to find companionship.

Still, there are some who don't fit into the 'typical' category.

This dilemma weighed heavily on Louise Maxwell.

About 10 months ago, Maxwell, launched a Web page that is a unique site catering to the medically disabled and differently-abled.

The idea behind the site is to help this group of people find romance, friendship or companionship.

A native of Sault Ste. Marie, Maxwell now lives in London, Ont. Since she began to work on the Internet site, she considers herself to be a modern-day Cupid.

"I knew of a site from the United Kingdom that helped match up disabled people, but I didn't know of any page like this one in North America," Maxwell said.

Maxwell said she worked in the medical field when she lived in the Sault. That's where

she met Brian, her husband of 29 years.

While working in a medical office, she was not shy to offer a helping hand to a client who was disabled or handicapped.

"My heart always went out to help others," Maxwell said. "Above and beyond my job if someone needed help with their taxes or wanted to talk, I was there."

Into her 30s Maxwell's life would take a significant turn, when a series of back problems and operations would restrict her mobility.

She moved to southern Ontario more than 20 years ago where she spent six months in a Toronto hospital.

Her family and friends were in Sault Ste. Marie and for the first time in her life Maxwell was very lonesome.

The host of operations, tests and therapy for her back did not cure Maxwell and for the last 30 years she has lived with back and mobility problems.

Knowing first hand how difficult it is to make new friends with a lack of mobility, Louise also wondered how people with disabilities found someone to spend time with including someone to date.

"From a lifetime of experiences, I can say that a disabled person does not lack the physical and emotional needs of an able bodied person," Maxwell said.

"Just because you are physically handicapped doesn't mean that your heart and soul are."

Inspired to help disabled people find happiness Maxwell launched www.soulfulencounters.com last May.

In the past 10 months of building a Web community of medically disabled and differently abled people, she has enjoyed some success.

The site has 1,000 members, most from the United States and Canada, but others from as far away as Japan have signed up.

They've filled the site with blogs, message boards and personal ads.

Maxwell describes the Web community as a place where friendships begin.

If romance follows, that's great. But she wants all users to be safe, make new friends and have some fun.

As many of the Web users keep in touch with Maxwell, she knows there have been a couple successful dates.

However, there have been no long-term connections or marriages, "as of yet," she said.

"Many times, I get a concerned parent asking if there is someone out there who can correspond with their adult child," Maxwell said. "It's always a similar story: that they are lonely, and want to meet or correspond with someone who is in a similar situation."

Louise was touched by the story of two Web site members in their mid-30s who made a connection.

"There was this man who lived with his parents in Woodstock, Ont. He was e-mailing a woman in North Carolina," Maxwell said.

"The lady from North Carolina was not well. She had a rare spinal cord disease, but it

didn't stop the two from writing to each other and sharing their dream to meet someone special."

Despite a mountain of obstacles, including distance and the fact that the young woman could not promise the young man much of a future due to her health, they wanted to meet.

In December, the young man's father drove his son from Woodstock to North Carolina.

Their meeting was a "neat" encounter, said Maxwell.

"If I could help two people find each other and be happy for one day, it's well worth this site being on the net," Maxwell said.

"This is very warming story.

"I don't think there will be a future for them. But that one date — I know it meant a lot for them because of the challenges they face."

Sault Ste. Marie will always have a special place in Maxwell's heart. She wants to see potential members from Northern Ontario visit her Web page.

"I have always considered the Sault to be my home, and I want people in the North to take notice of this site," Maxwell said.

The motto of the site is 'love could be a click away.' However, Maxwell stresses again and again that the site is much more than that.

"It's a community, a place where friendships begin for people who may be overlooked or forgotten."

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