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Ain't Nothin' But a Heartache?

Love and Dating on Campus

by Susan Murray

Real or Ideal? A Dating Story . . .

She was sitting in the Gazebo when a girlfriend introduced her to a young man. There was nothing more than that brief introduction. But then she would see him on campus and would say, "Hi!" He thought, "Ah-ha, she likes me." He didn't know that as a new freshman on campus she had decided to say hello to everyone she met.

He would sometimes stop by the table where she was eating in the cafeteria, and he enjoyed talking with her. One fall day, they found themselves together with a group of other students picking apples. Then just before Thanksgiving vacation she called him, and he thought, "Ah-ha, she likes me." She asked if he was going to eat in the cafeteria. He was. They did. Then the first email messages were exchanged. There wasn't a fast and furious exchange of messages, but that was the beginning.

By December they were still not dating, but he did ask her to the banquet. She had decided not to date her first year of college as she wanted to be focused on her studies, but she accepted his invitation. The conversation that evening was easy and the time together was nice, they both agreed. After that evening, they talked and decided not to start a dating relationship at that time.

However, during Christmas vacation, they talked on the phone every day. "It drove our families nuts!" they recall. These conversations gave them

time and opportunity to get to know one another on a deeper level, and in one of those conversations he asked her to be his "girlfriend." Her immediate reply was, "I'll think about it." She thought about it and agreed. Their new status was "weird" for their friends, as they had not been a part of the growing comfortableness between this young man and woman.

Spring break found him going home to meet her family, and then that summer they worked together at a youth camp on the east coast. It was a turning point in their relationship, as they recall developing a real sense of trust. They realized that they could be responsible for the campers and see one another every day, but that they didn't have to always be together. When they were off duty from camp responsibilities, they both enjoyed being with her family who lived nearby.

Returning to Andrews for the fall term, they felt more secure with one another, knowing the other wasn't going to "go away." Ironically, that security gave them the freedom to be with their wider circle of friends. Worship together in the Student Center became something they both

looked forward to every day.

By the next Christmas, the relationship developed to the point of talking about marriage. Now being well-



acquainted with her family from the previous summer, he felt accepted and enjoyed being with them. He planned to do the proposal the right way, and that included asking her father for permission to marry his daughter. The opportunity came when he was at her house, but he "chickened out."

A few days later, they flew out to his home for the New Year's holiday and her first meeting with his family. She felt welcomed and actually overwhelmed by his parents and sister's quick acceptance of her. By now they had been hearing about her for two years. She also recalls that this time she didn't say, "I'll think about it," when he romantically but nervously proposed on New Year's Eve.

As another spring approached, they made plans for a December wedding. They arranged for premarital counsel-

ing with the campus chaplain and continued to develop and strengthen their relationship, each continuing to seek God's plan for their lives and continuing as students at Andrews University.

Could this couple be for real?

Relationship Cornerstones

Even though many today are jaded by the hard realities of romances gone sour, hearts broken, marriages ended, we still pay attention to love and romance. Anticipating Valentine's Day, local newspapers encourage readers to send their most romantic "how we met" stories for publication. Ann Landers' readers send in letters describing the unusual ways couples meet. Television producers go to great lengths and expense to set up romantic first dates, showing revealing videos of a couple's first encounter together. Magazine headlines continue to entice us. In fact, so much has been written about love and romance that there almost seems to be an overemphasis of it in our society. Although love is indeed a powerful emotion, we know it's idealistic to think that love is all you need.

Dating can provide companionship, romance, excitement, recreation and fun, but it can also be a serious and costly enterprise. Dating produces a lot of anxiety, usually related to one's concern about the kind of impression one is making. Also, issues of power, manipulation and control become apparent in dating relationships and are danger signs that are all too often ignored in the quest for an intimate relationship.

Any developing relationship creates expectations and raises hopes, and one of the most

important qualities that any person brings to a relationship is good judgment.¹

Yet, beyond judgment, several attributes of relationships have been found to be highly predictive of couples' marital satisfaction. Happy premarital couples, who generally become happily

married couples, are those who: are realistic about the challenges of marriage, are satisfied with how they talk with one another, resolve conflicts well, feel good about the personality of their partner, agree on religious and ethical issues, have similar ideas about their duties and responsibilities in the relationship and household, and have a



good balance of individual and joint leisure activities.² Happy couples are also significantly similar in general activity, friendliness and personal relationships.³

A powerful element of a healthy long-term relationship is the emotional health of both people. For this to happen, a couple needs to become authentic. According to Neil Clark Warren, "If a person has experienced true unconditional love; and if he or she has worked hard to make authentic decisions about every aspect of life, you have found an emotionally healthy person."⁴ Verbal intimacy, more often mentioned by women than men, is another crucial factor in building a lifetime partner-

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ship. In today's model of companionship marriages, for some, it may be the most important "must-have" of all.

Love contains many elements including passion, romance, respect, jealousy,

support, commitment, friendship and tenderness. Dating and married couples can both experience many different qualities of love, but there are common distinctions. Love for dating and engaged couples typically contains more physical attraction, intimacy and passion, while love for married couples tends to contain more commitment and

affection.⁵ One of the reasons newlywed couples find that love diminishes and marriage is so difficult is that they typically are too idealistic.

Most people think of love as the thing that is most likely to make them happy. A determinedly idealized relationship cannot permit much honesty and even less reality, accord-

ing to Frank Pittman. He suggests that marriage is not about being in love. It is about the agreement to love one another. First learning the skills of friendship builds a foundation for married love. "We dare not fall in love in order to be made happy." Once people are past the point of having to appear ideal to each other, once they overcome their blindness to each other's weaknesses, reality can be noticed, negotiated, and faced together.⁶

Two areas of potential strength for marriage relationships are common educational goals and achievement and similar levels of intelligence; thus the college campus is a good place to meet a future spouse. When seeing someone

on a daily basis, in a college environment, one can easily see how their partner relates to friends, professors, work supervisors and many others. It is also an opportunity to observe if a person is dependable, how they handle responsibilities, if they are punctual, organized, orderly in their dorm room, apartment, car or personal study space, if they remember important dates, and if they are comfortable

with their dating partner's appearance and personal hygiene. A person's level of energy, both physical and emotional, is also important. These are all areas where conflicts arise in marriage relationships.⁷

I would suggest that the college campus is an ideal place to develop these important aspects of a love relationship. And it happens at Andrews University.

The "Real Thing"

You may be wondering if the couple described above could be real people at Andrews. Yes they are! This couple built a strong foundation for their relationship. Their approach to dating and eventually marriage may not parallel the media's depiction of a wild, passionate, romantic courtship. But that is not to say there hasn't been passion and romance. The important thing is that they took the time to really know one another, their friends and their families before even talking about mar-



December 28, 2001, and will graduate together from Andrews University this coming May. I asked this newlywed couple, "What's the best thing about

the "stuff" good marriages are built from.

I have found that love relationships can be tenaciously strong and yet incredibly fragile at the same time. Being intentionally committed to the person, to marriage, to being an authentic person ourselves, and to serving the right God—these are the cornerstones of a lifetime relationship to another person.



riage. They became authentic to one another. They studied, worshiped and played together. They sought guidance from older, more experienced people. They built a relationship with open eyes, faced differences and planned for their marriage, not just their wedding.

Jonathan and Sheila were married on

being married?" They replied, "Walking home together." "Waking up next to one another." "Learning to live together." And those are the small steps that lead to lifelong intimacy, the glue that holds a relationship together when life circumstances bring new challenges. In my opinion, they have

¹ Warren, N. C., (1999). How to know if someone is worth pursuing in two dates or less. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, p. 69.

² Olson, D., DeFrain, J., & Olson, A. (1999). Building relationships: Developing skills for life. Minneapolis, MN: Life Innovations, Inc., pp. 57-60.

³ Blum, J.S., & Mehrabian, A. (1999). Personality and temperament correlates of marital satisfaction. *Journal of Personality*, 67, 93-125.

⁴ Warren, op. cit., p. 122.

⁵ Olson, DeFrain, & Olson, op. cit, p. 85.

⁶ Pittman, F. (1998). *Grow up: How taking responsibility can make you a happy adult*. NY: St. Martin's Griffin., pp. 261-262.

⁷ Warren, op. cit.

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