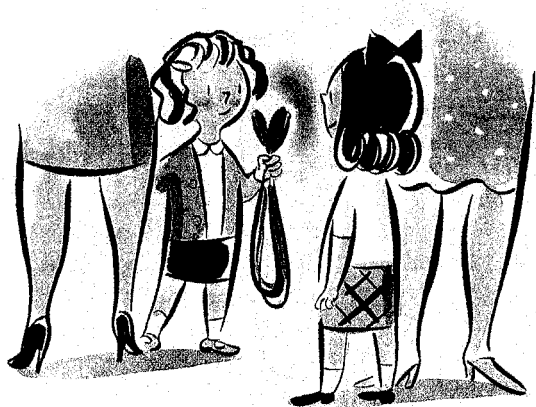


making friends

Once we graduate from grade school, meeting new people and establishing new relationships seem harder and harder. Unless, of course, you have some help.



When Gail Martin split up with her husband Patrick in late 1991, she got the big white loveseat and all the Ashley dinnerware—but he got the friends. The couple had met in theatre school six years earlier, and most of their friendships were from that time. After the separation, Gail immediately took up with another partner, and Patrick was cast in a more sympathetic light by their cronies who regarded him as betrayed and generally hard done by. Ironically, it was Gail who was left feeling the most alone. “I had to start making friends all over again,” she recalls. “It was the hardest thing I’d done.”

Somewhere along the line, forming new friendships in life seems to stay in the domain of young people. By the time a person reaches “a certain age,” it’s expected that she would have amassed all of her life’s friendships, like doilies in a trousseau, in preparation for facing the world. But no one figures into the plan a divorce, a move to a new city, or any other twists that inevitably leap into a person’s life path—twists that threaten to deprive a person of all things familiar.

Ruth Claramunt, president of Hearts, a Toronto-based introduction service, emphatically agrees that adults have a harder go at connecting with peers than their kids do. “When you’re younger, you’re involved with school, you’re involved with sports. You’re simply around more people who do the same things you do. But when you’re all grown up, it’s a different story.”

But Claramunt is confident that identifying and hooking up with friendly soulmates as an adult is doable. It all boils down to one thing—effort. “If you see someone you think might be interesting and if it occurs to you that you might like to get to know them better, pursue it,” she says. “Take the next step. Ask them if they’d like to go out for dinner, to grab a movie together, or just to go to Chapters and have a coffee. Anything to get beyond the level of simply nodding and saying hello.”

Last summer, Claramunt made good on her own ▶

advice when she and her family moved into another part of Toronto. Rather than let the unfamiliar surroundings daunt her, this self-described "relationship consultant," after living in her new neighbourhood for two months, marched onto the front porches of all her neighbours, rapped on their doors and invited them to a barbecue in her backyard.

One doesn't need an industrial-sized grill nor quite this degree of chutzpah to attract new companions. Rhonda Freeman is the director of Families in Transition, a department of the Family Services Association of Toronto that works with separating, divorcing and remarrying families. She suggests that adults seeking other adults for friendships keep their hobbies front and centre: "If you share an interest with someone, you're going to have some common ground."

From Japanese-conversation clubs to Siberian husky lovers' societies, there are formal organizations nowadays for almost any interest and stage of life imaginable. Passionate about petunias? Bloom in a gardeners' club. Crazy about Chekhov? Act out your devotion to him in a community theatre. Single parents can congregate with empathizers of their solitary plights in associations dedicated to just that goal. New moms who feel isolated at home with their babies can join special groups comprised of other moms in similar situations. There are lesbian and gay associations for homosexual men and women who feel like society's outcasts. There are even tall clubs, for the vertically blessed seeking similarly endowed companions.

According to Freeman, adults should approach their search for friends in a methodical way, beginning with a scan of the phone book. For starters, look for community centres, houses of worship and recreation centres. Newspapers generally have community calendars that list local activities such as lectures and concerts. Volunteer work is also a wonderful way to make new acquaintances. Finally, check into activities offered by local art galleries and museums which will often host social events around particular themes. "These kinds of



situations are safer, particularly if you're really shy," advises Freeman. "This way, you're in a group; if you meet people you don't want to see again, it's not awkward."

Lori Longden has been—twice in

her life now—virtually plucked out of familiar, socially rich surroundings. And both times she landed on her feet. A native of Riverside, Calif., Longden moved to the Toronto area with her new Canadian husband four years ago, "without a clue of where I was going or what I was in for." Once they were settled, she made a point of inviting her husband's business associates over for dinner and introducing herself to their wives. In no time, she recalls, she and the women had formed their own little social circle, so much so that they ceased to rely on their husbands for nurturing their friendships.

Then this past winter, her husband's work transferred him to London, England, and Longden

had to start all over again. "As soon as I got there, I opened up the phone book to 'Clubs and Societies,'" she remembers. Within the first week, Longden knew all of her neighbours. During one of her conversations with them, she asked if there was a community centre in the neighbourhood and trotted off to sign up for an upholstery course. Then she visited the library's poster board and discovered a listing for part-time courses and community activities. Later she went to the American consulate in London and asked if they knew of any groups she might join. On her way home, she dropped in at the bookstore and asked the same question.

"Making new friends at my age is hard," 31-year-old Longden admits. "But you have to initiate it because it will not come knocking on your door." Claramunt, who's now happily ensconced in a neighbourhood with a handful of new, barbecue-loving pals, agrees. "Being the initiator is really, really difficult, but you have to do that. Push yourself beyond your comfort zone. Go beyond your boundary, talk to people, try to make friends," she explains, "because you know what? It works." **G**

Seeking a friend for something a little more than friendship?

The experts suggest adopting the same approach. "After all," says Ruth Claramunt, president of Hearts, a Toronto-based introduction service, "loving relationships start off with friendships." Join a club or participate in an organized outing for singles who share a common passion. There's one caveat from Rhonda Freeman, director of Families in Transition, a United Way association. "Think first of who you want to meet and the kind of relationship you're interested in having," she advises. "It depends on what your first interest is—the activity or the person. You might have a love for theatre, but if you don't think you'll meet men there, you should probably choose a different activity." The political arena, she adds, is generally a pretty good bet for surrounding yourself with the masculine sex.