

Louise Maxwell knows the problems the disabled have in starting new relationships. So she's helping them on her website.

ENTERPRISE: Giving disabled a chance to find someone

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Though she is married, Louise Maxwell is quite upfront about the fact an Internet dating service changed her life.

The service is SoulfulEncounters.com, and she is the founder. Although it began as a dating service, its users quickly transformed it into a community of individuals looking to form friendships in cyberspace.



CHRISTOPHER CLARK

Maxwell, 61, was never interested in creating a dating service for twentysomethings looking to hook up with each other. Her service is dedicated to people with physical or medical disabilities, people she knows from experience can have trouble making friendships and finding like-minded people with whom they can share time and attention.



"I worked in medical offices for 20 years and I saw a lot of people with physical disabilities," Maxwell says. "Attitudes have changed since then, but I saw a lot of people being ignored. If someone is in a wheelchair, it's common for them to be talked over and ignored."

A CLICK AWAY: Louise Maxwell's website, SoulfulEncounters.com, has evolved from a dating service to a community. (MIKE HENSEN/Sun Media)

Maxwell was already sympathetic to the situation of many disabled, and then she ran into a series of health challenges that left her unable to leave her home for years at a time.

An auto accident in Saudi Arabia in 1982 triggered a lifelong battle for mobility, an experience that has included five major back surgeries and episodes of chronic pain she has learned to manage, but not avoid.

Her husband, Brian, is visually impaired and cannot drive.

"Every day I get up and I don't know what I will be able to do that day. I make plans, but I never know what I can do until the moment arrives," she says.

In an effort to keep herself busy and learn something new, she started dabbling with the Internet two years ago. She wanted to do something focused on disabled people, and her initial foray was a dating service.

"That was how it started, but it expanded into something more very quickly," she says. "Many disabled are so lonely, so I found that a lot of people were spending time in the chat room on my site. They were talking to each other, regardless of their location or disability.

"It became a social setting, a community."

After launching the site in May 2006, Maxwell rejigged it and switched Internet providers last fall. Since then, it has been growing every week. Friends recommend the site to each other, and many people have turned to Maxwell for advice and help. She dives in and helps whenever she can.

Recently, she helped an epileptic in the U.S. find free medical care, then helped him apply for Medicaid.

In the same spirit, she has given some loyal website visitors tasks that help keep the site operating. It makes them feel good and helps Maxwell handle the daily load of keeping her site running smoothly.

She hopes to sell some advertising to defray her costs or turn a small profit this year. That's far down her list of hopes for the project, but it would ensure the site's continued viability -- and that's at the top of her wish list.

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LOUISE MAXWELL

www.SoulfulEncounters.com (see link).