

Press

RESIDENT Manhattan Resident

By Leslie Rosenberg

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Few events evoke such conflicting emotions as the blind date. You know the feeling: you're getting ready to meet a total stranger, and your stomach begins to churn with a mixture of eager anticipation and a consummate dread, of unbridled hope coupled with sheer self-loathing. As the moment of your fateful encounter draws near, you think to yourself, there must be a better way.

There is, thanks to Jose de Lasa (age 31) and Graham McAden (age 27), the brains behind Social Circles. "It's not a dating service," says McAden of their venture, "our primary service is to be a people pool." More specifically, Social Circles is an activity service, designed to match up New Yorkers to meet, mingle and do something fun with other people who share their interests.

"We attract people of similar age and background," says de Lasa. "But we have no hard and fast rules about what groups get matched up. We simply put together great activities for normal people."

De Lasa quit his job at a top New York law firm to start the company in October of 1997 together with McAden, who worked in public relations. The two developed the idea after experiencing first-hand the frustration of trying to meet new people in the city that never sleeps. Most young professionals have a fixed group of friends, de Lasa notes, and they've met all their friends' friends.

So how do you make new contacts? Blind dates are one option, he concedes, but too often, the couple ends up merely "exchanging verbal resumes." Going out as a group, on the other hand, helps take the pressure off. "You're doing things that are interesting, and who you are is coming out naturally," he says.

Every month members receive a calendar of 35 to 40 activities, including such diverse pursuits as bowling, wine tasting, visiting the metropolitan museum, or taking in an off-Broadway show. The average age of members falls between 24 - 42, the proprietors say, and the average group is eight to twenty people. Members are college educated professionals who generally live and work in New York and they're all after one thing: fun.

Our philosophy is, if you put [a group of] people in the same age range in an interesting environment, doing something they're excited to do, they're going to have a good time and they're going to get to know each other," says McAden.

I was so curious to experience a Social Circles' activity myself - and more than eager to add some spice to my flagging social life - so I asked to participate in Social Circles outing. I provided McAden and de Lasa with the requisite information regarding my age, profession, interests and the times I was available. McAden phoned the following Monday with two suggestions: I could join one group to take a ride up to the top of the Empire State Building and admire the view of the City, or meet up with another group at an upper east side café for an evening of board games and coffee. I had to be truthful - neither event sounded remotely appealing to me. "I was kind of hoping to go bowling or play pool," I confided, "no problem," McAden replied. Shooting pool was scheduled for the following evening.

The next morning, de Lasa faxed me that night's itinerary, which included an idiot-proof map and instructions for finding our designated meeting place, Amsterdam Billiards on East 86th St. Of course, whenever you make something idiot proof, God creates a better idiot. In our case, it was Jim, a 30-year old Westchester native who arrived an hour late because he had first gone to Amsterdam Billiards on the upper west side. Our group complete, we commenced the introductions. Besides myself and Jim, there were Andrea and Hope, two 30 year old friends from the upper west side who had signed up together; Pontus, also 30, who hailed from downtown and Josh, 27, from Brooklyn Heights.

We shot pool for an hour, then went to Pizzeria Uno for a few beers and a snack. Everyone was surprisingly at ease, considering that the six of us had been thrown together somewhat randomly, and we managed to entertain ourselves for three hours before calling it a night. It was like going to a friend's wedding and being seated at a table with five other bright charismatic guests. Although no one made a love connection, it's safe to say that everyone had a good time.

"It's just a good way to meet people," McAden says. "And even if all the people are total jerks - which has never happened - hey, you still did something interesting."

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