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Senior Class

Computer Courting: Online dating discovers a new age

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By Nate Guidry, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Barbara Stumpf was convinced she wasn't going to meet anyone.

At 65 and divorced for 18 years, she was resigned to spending the rest of her life alone.

Then she saw an advertisement for an Internet dating service -- **eHarmony** -- on television. A few days later, she heard another eHarmony spot on radio.

"I kept hearing this, and I wondered what it was all about," said Mrs. Stumpf from her home in West Chester, Pa. "I was the last person that thought this was something I would do. But I kept hearing the advertisement, and this went on for more than a week.

After some trepidation, she took the leap.

She joined eHarmony, filled out a personality questionnaire and waited for the responses to start pouring in.

It didn't take long for her to discover she was not alone -- either figuratively or literally. Dating sites such as eHarmony are experiencing an increase in business from people 55 years and older.

Seniors, in fact, are the fastest growing group of online users, according



Anita Dufalla, Post-Gazette

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to Nielsen/NetRatings, an Internet research firm. Nielsen says computer users 55 and older account for 16.7 percent of all traffic to online personal sites -- the equivalent of 4.2 million unique visitors. At Yahoo Personals, those over 50 account for 21 percent of their visitors.

All of this suggests that seniors are becoming more computer savvy and more comfortable surfing the Internet, which leads to their growing interest in online dating.

To that end, Deborah Carr, an associate professor of sociology at Rutgers University who has studied online dating interest among people 65 and older who had lost a spouse, reported in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* that romantic relationships among the elderly are on the rise simply because the Internet has made it easier for older singles to meet.



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Mrs. Stumpf is living proof of dating success in the virtual world. In short order, she received more than 10 "matches." And though most of the responses were from younger men, she was excited. She had gone from virtually zero interest from men to 10 in a matter of days.

"I had never used a dating service," said Mrs. Stumpf. "I had met people through work and friends, but none of it had worked out. I was resigned to the fact that at my stage in life, my chances of meeting someone who would be interested in me probably wasn't going to happen."

Within a couple of weeks using the Internet dating service, she received correspondence from the man who is now her husband, Karl Stumpf. Mr. Stumpf, a Lutheran pastor and a corporate customer service representative, said he had been a member of eHarmony for about 10 months and was preparing to cancel his membership before meeting Barbara.

Mr. Stumpf, 61, has three children from a previous 33-year marriage.

"Over those 10 months I went on about a dozen different dates," he said. "They were all nice women, but nothing clicked. I was looking for someone I could spend the rest of my life with, and I knew she had to be out there somewhere. I just needed to stay patient. ...

"Then I met Barbara. We exchanged e-mails and started talking on the phone and eventually decided to meet."

The couple met in August of 2004. Three months later, Mrs. Stumpf

received an engagement ring. And in May of 2005 they were married.

Barbara said the entire experience was comfortable.

"When I first started, I thought it was funny that there were people looking for someone on the computer. Now, I tell all my single friends they need to get out there and meet someone. The computer will find matches for you and my friends are starting to take my advice."

Anita P. Miller, author of the Online Dating Journal, www.theonlinedatingjournal.com, which records online dating contacts and experiences, said more than 40 million people are using internet dating services. She estimates there are hundreds of different services available, some of which are geographically based while others target a specific demographic or lifestyle.

The main sites, Ms. Miller said, are eHarmony, [PerfectMatch](#) and [Match.com](#). But now there are other sites designed exclusively for the mature adult, such as [SeniorFriendFinder.com](#), [50yearsplus.com](#) and [SeniorsCircle.com](#).

Ms. Miller said more and more seniors are turning to online dating services because they, too, have a need for companionship.

"Unlike younger adults, senior searches are geared toward long-term companionship," she said. "They're not trying to find multiple dates; they're searching for someone they can spend quality time with and spend the balance of their lives with."

Ms. Miller dispelled some of the misconceptions about online dating.

She said that one of the things she frequently hears is that people who use these services can't find a date the traditional way.

"The reality is that people who are online dating are the people you see in everyday society," she said. "These are the same people you see at the grocery store, at church and other places you would normally find people. It's just a lot of singles still won't admit they are doing it and are still embarrassed about it. I think the people who are very comfortable with themselves are not concerned with what people think. For me, online dating allows me to take control of the situation."

Ms. Miller, who grew up in Columbus, Ohio, but now lives in Atlanta, said one of the benefits of online dating is that it saves time. But, she added, you still "have to be smart and do the research."

Some people may misrepresent themselves, whether by photo or by distorting facts such as age or marital status.

Ms. Miller said personal and financial safety should be emphasized -- a

lesson not just for older daters.

"People tend to prey upon older people because they think they are lonely, but this isn't exclusive to seniors," she said. "You always want to practice safety. You never want to do anything online that you wouldn't do in a conventional dating situation. You also want to be aware of the types of personal information that you're giving out, because that can lead to identity theft."

One of the things Ms. Miller recommends is having a background check done prior to going out with a potential date.

"I have been online dating off and on for about five years and I always have the checks done. It provides me with a comfort level," she said.

As widowed, divorced and otherwise single seniors turn more frequently to the Internet as matchmaker, that comfort level should be a priority.

"I'm just over-the-top careful," Ms. Miller said, "because you have to be. I'd rather be safe than sorry."

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