Love Connection

November 1, 2000 By Dawn MacKeen

If Paula Pagan could have everything she wanted in a man, he would come with eyes like Billy Dee Williams' and a head as bald as Mr. Clean's; he would be dependable, black like her and tall but not too. Above all, Mr. Right would have one other, very important thing in common with her -- HIV.

The 37-year-old mother of four has been routinely disappointed in the losers she's dated in her hometown of Springfield, Massachusetts. "You meet someone and tell them that you're HIV positive, and they look at you like 'Why the hell are you out there looking for a companion?'" she says. "One day I hope to get married and settle down. I want what every other woman who is not HIV positive wants." So she posted a personal ad at Heterochat (*www.heterochat.org*), a website for straight HIVers, and waited for the fireworks.

Pagan is just one of a growing number of people venturing online for companionship, romance or just a night of hot sex. Scores of sites have sprung up in recent years devoted entirely to matchmaking for HIVers. For gay men in particular, the web has become a great dating arena -- America Online tends to be the most popular location, with countless M4M (men-for-men) chat rooms, including HIVM4M.

"Love is the No. 1 issue in the HIV community today," says Don Johnson, director and founder of Living Positive (*www.livingpositive.com*), a site for gay and straight HIVers. "Treatments have given someone hope where they might not have had it before. Instead of being isolated, they're looking to find someone."

On sites like these, HIVers are among their own and can preempt the often-uncomfortable "disclosure" conversation. They also offer a chance to those who are still in the closet about their status, like 24-year-old William, who lives in a small Louisiana town and is afraid of the repercussions of disclosing to friends and neighbors. "I've gone to support groups, I've looked at people in the clinics and there isn't anyone who is in their 20s and positive," he says. "I thought I should post an ad. Otherwise, how else would anyone know where to find me?"

But as in any dating scenario, there are pluses to meeting online and some major minuses. A recent study by the San Francisco Department of Public Health found that 17 percent of the people coming into a local STD clinic had slept with someone they had met online. A study in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* found that those who meet others online and then get laid are -- like their peers across the digital divide -- at risk of getting an STD. "But it doesn't mean that the

Internet is going to be the downfall of sexual encounters or relationships," says Sheana Bull, study coauthor. "People who use the medium should be informed of whether doing so will introduce them to people or situations that might be risky."

Because websites defy geographical barriers, they allow you to cast a wider net. If you're in a small town, where the dating pool doesn't hold that many people, logging on can allow you to be a bit more picky. But many HIVers meeting online said they tend to move very quickly to intimacy -- whether sex or a longer partnership -- because of a perceived acceleration of their biological clock. To reduce the chances of an unhappy ending, introductions to these HIV-specific sites encourage users to take such relationships slowly.

Remember, the beauty—and the beast—of the World Wide Web is that it's anonymous. People can be whoever they want. According to a study by David Greenfield, a psychologist and author of *Virtual Addictions* (New Harbinger), half of web users lied about at least one aspect of their life on a regular basis, such as general appearance, weight or marital status.

But rest assured, most cyber-romances are probably more akin to Kevin's experience. The 33-year-old East Coaster has gone out with a dozen or so HIVers he's met online -- to the park, the movies, the zoo, dinner and, sometimes, bed. "I've met a couple of females who have posted photos of themselves from years ago," he says. "Other than that, it's just like dating: Some good, some bad." No encounter has resulted in Kevin finding his better half, although that may be about to change. Recently he's met a striking woman online, who's HIV positive and shares his outlook on life. She's coming from Florida to visit him in a week. Although cautious, for the first time in a long time, he's hopeful, too.

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