

Annie, Get a Gun

*Singles Are Jumping Out of Planes and Getting
Splattered by Paintballs—All to Meet Someone Interesting
Enough to Date.* By **DEBORAH KNUCKEY**

LEFT SHOULDER, CHECK. RIGHT shoulder, check." He straps me close to him. "Left hip, check. Right hip, check."

As we shuffle on our knees toward the open door, I'm closer to a man than I have been in a while.

"Three, two, one"—and I am screaming as the earth tumbles and the plane vanishes. Two seconds of eternity later, I am flying through the sky.

What a girl does to meet a guy.

My skydiving instructor— young, fresh-faced, and reassuring—places in my hands the cords that control the chute and talks me safely down to earth. As I unstrap and trade smiles with my fellow skydivers, the cheers of 20 other Washington singles drift across the field.

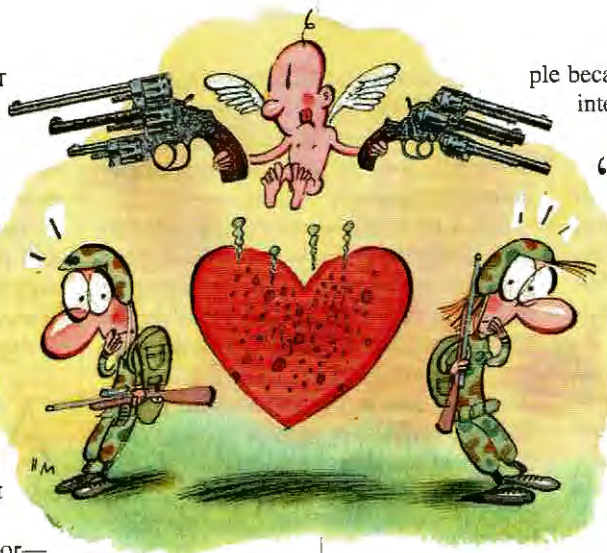
MEETING YOUR MATCH IS NOT WHAT IT USED TO BE. Adrenaline hits are replacing overpriced drinks. "Have you tried this before?" is replacing "Do you come here often?" Single Washingtonians are turning to events where they get to take home a good story and perhaps a phone number.

Area singles groups offer activities ranging from biking tours of wineries to sea kayaking—all to get hearts to race, perchance to pound. Most participants are in their twenties, thirties, and forties, though singles in their sixties show up.

The trend mirrors a general tendency toward more-adventurous pastimes. Bethesda psychotherapists and relationship coaches John Becker and Harriet Kramer-Becker say that such events are better ways for active singles to find potential mates.

"It's a more powerful venue for meeting appropriate peo-

Deborah Knuckey is author of *The Ms. Spent Money Guide* (Wiley, 2001). She has appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and her second personal-finance book will be released this fall.



ple because you know you have shared interests," says John Becker.

WHEN YOU HAVE A group of people doing something like jumping out of a plane, you have more to talk about," agrees Liana Dutcher, who planned the skydiving day.

Dutcher advertised the event through Single Volunteers of DC, which has 7,000 people on its e-mail list. Officially, SVDC organizes volunteer activities, with the occasional social outing thrown in.

Unofficially, members plan ad-hoc events like kayaking and scuba. The day of skydiving (\$155) was less organized than official events—I got a flurry of e-mails as people stumbled through the logistics.

Now, at the drop zone near Laurel, Delaware, most of us aren't quite sure where to check in and who is part of our group. I'm grateful I drove with a friend and have someone to sit with as we wait to jump.

Friends Troy McGill, 31, and Wendy Ekstrom, 33, met at an SVDC event where they renovated a wildlife refuge in Virginia. Ekstrom says skydiving is something they had always wanted to do.

Could it be that falling out of the sky is more relaxing than a singles event at a bar?

"It's more casual and less stressful," McGill says.

WHO SAYS YOU CAN'T GET A MAN WITH A GUN?

ARRIVING AT THE LEARNING ESCAPES PISTOL-SHOOTING class, for which I've paid \$62, I am given a nametag and a folder of NRA materials. I take a seat, movie-theater style, with an empty seat between the next person and me. People read and reread their material until, slowly, pockets of conversation emerge. The three hours of lectures and instructor-supervised handling of unloaded guns will prepare us for an hour on the shooting range. Regardless of our aim, we will each walk away with

the NRA's First Steps Pistol Orientation certificate.

Revolver or semiautomatic? It's the NRA equivalent of smoking or nonsmoking. Once guns are in our hands for loading and safety drills, conversation is firing. While we wait our turn for an NRA instructor, a video summons bogeyman fears, showing a poor maiden home alone when an intruder appears.

What attracted Marjorie Schenk, 51, to this event?

"When I was little, my heroine was Annie Oakley," she says. "I thought guns were the greatest thing, but of course I was six years old and had no idea what a gun could do."

As an adult, Schenk sees understanding the gun culture as part of deciphering the male culture.

"A number of men I have met do have guns, and I find that off-putting. This was a way for me to get a little closer to something men find more fascinating than women do and learn about it, like football."

LEARNING ESCAPES, WITH MORE THAN 26,000 people on its e-mail list, was started after former television reporter Christy Waters and artist Carol Vogel found that local hiking groups didn't offer much in the way of great odds.

"We tried all the hiking clubs in DC and couldn't find any with a lot of singles," Waters says. "Also, we wanted to get people out of the city, to do more scenic hikes than many of the hiking clubs offered."

Learning Escapes tempts singles with everything from photography courses to rock climbing to foreign vacations. The group is growing, despite hundreds' dropping off the list each year—for the right reason. In 2001, at least 200 couples who met at Learning Escapes events were married. As many couples were in their forties

as were in their twenties and thirties, and often the women were older than the men. Waters feels that people sum up one another differently in an environment where looks are not the primary differentiator.

"They didn't meet at a bar. They met on a hike where they had to pull each other up the trail, the women helping the men as much as the men helping the women," she says.

By the end of the day, we get a turn at the firing range. A girl with a gun has to know what she's aiming for.

I move fast to pair up with the young, good-looking instructor, leaving the other participants with the hirsute hunter types. He adjusts my grip and stance and murmurs instructions as the 22-caliber semiautomatic rests lightly in my hand. A surprisingly gentle squeeze of the trigger, and the paper target is toast.

PAY DIRT. AT A DAY OF PAINTBALL RUN by the DC Society of Young Professionals, there is a 3-to-1 ratio of men to women, a rarity in a town supposedly dominated by single women.

It is a cool Sunday morning in the Virginia foothills, and about 40 people have paid \$50 to be here. Men—a surprising number in camouflage gear—break the ice as they compare war stories from past battles. The atmosphere is more relaxed and inclusive than at any other event I have been to, despite—or perhaps because of—the lack of nametags and introductions.

Separated into two large teams, everyone is quick to mingle and meet, plotting paintball attacks on the other team.

A series of morning battles begins—in forested fields scattered with wooden forts and bunkers—and leaders emerge. During one battle, I suggest, "Let's take them by surprise by charging as a group straight up the middle. They'll be too spread out to get

us all before we get the flag." I'm one of the first to be taken out by an explosion of orange paint. The rest of the team goes down like flies. I cross "military strategist" off my list of dream jobs.

As a slow-moving target, I get hit often, and hit on. Charging breathlessly up the side of the battlefield with an ex-soldier, he says, "I just wanted to get you alone." A paintball catches me in the calf, and I welcome my timely demise.

DCSYP has a 25,000-person e-mail list and runs activities ranging from purely social to very physical. Like Learning Escapes, DCSYP e-mails lists of events and offers online registration. If an event is distant, carpools or buses may be organized.

Not everyone is single, and DCSYP founders Michael Karlan and Greg Bland—lawyers by day, socializers by night—say many feel more comfortable coming to events without the "single" label. According to Karlan and Bland, two-thirds of those at their profile dinners, where tables of singles are matched by interests, say they enjoy outdoor activities.

"People are trying to be more active and will do bolder things than they used to," says Karlan. The recipe seems successful: "I tried to count the marriages, but I ran out of fingers and toes."

AT LUNCH, WE PAINTBALLERS CHAT over hot dogs and chips. A group of singles concludes that the odds of meeting a mate are best at events stereotypically of interest to the opposite sex. The men's eyebrows raise when I mention DCSYP's evening at *Cloudstreet*, a play at the Kennedy Center, that had one man to more than a dozen women. Yet they're quick to say they would not attend something they had little interest in—"You know, like ballet," one says—for the sake of meeting women.

The imbalance of the events I attended is rare, Bland says. "Our events are so large that they tend to even out. Women RSVP earlier than men, but it evens out by the day of the event." The only social engineering occurs in the few specifically singles events, where the numbers are kept even.

After lunch, we grab our gear and trudge up the hill. The Venus/Mars differences fade as we all become cloaked in leaves and splatters of paint. Women glory in their hits. Men pool resources to share the remaining paintballs. Everyone is happy and high on a day of hard play, hoping that at least one welt is in a place suitable for showing to colleagues the next day.

Despite his camo gear, I spot an attractive redhead on the other side of a thicket. He's tall, charming, and, I hope, single. I take aim. Perhaps Cupid uses a paintball gun. ■

Good Places to Take Aim

Finding a Singles Event That's Right for You

■ **DC Society of Young Professionals**, www.dcyoungpro.com. More than 25,000 members; about 70 percent are single. Hosts 10 to 20 events a month—some draw more than 1,000 people—ranging from orienteering to a big New Year's Eve bash. No membership fee.

■ **www.singlesonthego.com/dc**. To find sports, charity, church, civic, and other groups that sponsor activities for area singles, check out this Web site.

■ **Single Volunteers of DC**, www.singlevolunteers.org/dc. More than 7,000 singles volunteer to renovate schools, clean up parks, and provide other charitable help. Volunteer events are free. Members often form ad-hoc groups for scuba, skydiving, and hik-

ing through the weekly e-mail classifieds. Other events include a spring party and a cruise. No membership fee.

■ **Singles to Soulmates**, www.singlestosoulmates.com. Psychotherapists John Becker and Harriet Kramer-Becker coach individuals and groups on how to find the love of your life. Fees vary. They also offer a free e-mail newsletter.

■ **Learning Escapes**, www.learningescapes.com. The 26,370 single members have a choice of 12 to 15 events a month—offerings like skiing and hang-gliding, often with dinner afterward. Also courses on subjects such as photography and ceramics; four or five international vacations a year; and events just for those under or over 35. No membership fee.



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