

Sweet Charity.(Single Volunteers of Washington, D.C., offers a way for single people to meet)(Brief Article)

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Matchmaker Dana Kressierer runs a singles group with a twist: The members click while doing good deeds

Eight men and women in shorts and T-shirts are working up a sweat--and finding time to flirt--on a steamy Saturday afternoon. Some trendy gym? A beach volleyball game? No, the setting is a construction site in a rundown section of Washington, D.C., where the workers do their mingling while building a house for a disadvantaged family. "This is such an unthreatening way to meet people," says Meg Spencer, 38, an efficiency consultant who has volunteered for the project. "I figure not too many ax murderers would be involved with something like this."

The psycho-free socializing comes courtesy of a modern-day Cupid named Dana Kressierer, 29, a software analyst who runs Single Volunteers of D.C. in her spare time. With more than 2,500 members, SVDC is the largest of several groups nationwide that let singles meet while performing such deserving deeds as tending to needy children and building a school. "It's a chance for people to do something good and feel good about themselves," says Kressierer. "And it offers a huge pool of nice, intelligent people looking for partners."

Thanks to record numbers of unmarried Americans frustrated by the search for Ms. or Mr. Right, SVDC is thriving. The group has spawned at least 10 certifiably happy couples since its first project in April 1997, and dozens of members (those who get serious must stop attending events) are dating each other. "I expected a bunch of couch potatoes, but it's a great group," vouches Healey Hartnett, 27, a graphic artist who met her boyfriend while sprucing up a cemetery. Paul Nahay, founder of the D.C. cleanup organization Trash Force, seconds the notion. "They're real go-getters, really gung ho and enthusiastic," he says. "They're not just here for the singles thing."

Neither is Kressierer, who spends some 30 hours a week and \$1,500 a year maintaining the group's Web site, which alerts members to the 25 or so projects she organizes each month. (Most members are in their early thirties, and they pay nothing to join.) On a typical evening, Kressierer fires up the computer in her newly purchased three-bedroom Cape Cod-style house in College Park, Md., to field pleas from organizations in need and e-mail from singles, making sure a roughly even number of men and women turn up at each project. "I get so much out of volunteer work," she says. "How many times do you get the opportunity to build a school from scratch?"

Good works come naturally to Kressierer. Her father, Fred, a salesman for American Express, and mother, Sheila, a homemaker, were both active volunteers, and as a child growing up in Aurora, Ohio, Dana participated in swimathons and other fund-raisers. And when Kressierer, who has a master's degree in sociology, split from a boyfriend in early 1997, she cringed at the thought of available social watering spots. "I felt singles groups were for dweebs," she says. "Guys in leisure suits. And the idea of going to singles dances and standing against a wall hoping somebody asked me to dance was not appealing." A magazine article about a singles volunteer group in Vermont inspired her and a friend, Catharine Robertson, 29, a computer consultant, to start SVDC.

The pair posted a bulletin on the Internet, marshaling 30 volunteers for the launch meeting. "The group forced me to get out of the house," says Kressierer. "It made me more outgoing." Yet it was Robertson who met the man of her dreams--Patrick Savolskis, 30--at that first meeting. Now engaged, the couple recently moved to Upstate New York. Robertson confesses she feels "very guilty" about leaving her friend to run SVDC by herself. But Kressierer is happy with her role as matchmaker and only sometimes feels doubly deprived. "It's wonderful for Catharine, but I miss her," she says. And, she adds, "I just wish I could find someone for me!"

COLOR PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPH BY DANUTA OTFINOWSKI/MATRIX "Before starting the group, I was shy," says Kressierer (in her backyard with Chase). "Now, I walk up to people and start conversations." [Dana Kressierer lying in hammock with laptop computer near dog]

COLOR PHOTO: KATHERINE LAMBERT "Volunteering makes meeting people easy," says Kressierer, cleaning up the capital. [Dana Kressierer and other SVDC volunteers picking up garbage on the Washington Mall]

COLOR PHOTO: JAMES LUKOSKI/BLACK STAR Catharine Robertson met fiance Patrick Savolskis (in their new home) through the group. [Catharine Robertson and Patrick Savolskis unpacking boxes]