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January 17, 2006 6:59AM

Fast and furious

For speed daters, sparks and time must fly

OUR FAMILIES

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So, screaming "What's your name?" over the pulsing music at Club Fever hasn't been your ticket to romance? You've found that The Linebacker isn't exactly a pool of potential spouses?

Before you write off the South Bend-area dating scene completely, take a moment to consider a more modern method. This month and next, Michiana singles will have the chance to try speed dating.

Online dating service Cupid.com will host speed-dating events at The Phoenix next Tuesday and at Union Station on Feb. 7. In March, they'll be at Fiddler's Hearth.

In case you missed the scenes in "Sex in the City," "Hitch," or "The Forty-Year-Old Virgin," here's the deal. With speed dating, there are equal numbers of men and women, and people rotate from one single to the next, going on six-minute "dates."

Armed with a clipboard, they take notes and wait for sparks to fly. To avoid the whole rejection thing, no one can ask for phone numbers. Instead, participants discretely circle "Let's Talk Again" next to the names of those they clicked with.

After the event, participants log on to Cupid.com and find out the results. If the person they liked likes them, each will receive an e-mail with the other's contact information.

Jeff Williams, a 33-year-old computer programmer from Osceola, will attend the event on Feb. 7. He says that when most of your friends are married, you work 8 to 5 and you're a single father, meeting someone can be tough.



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8 p.m. Jan. 24 at The Phoenix, 101 Lincoln Way W., Mishawaka. Open to all single professionals ages 26-39. Cost is \$35 if registration made by Sunday. After that, \$40.

Feb. 7 at Union Station, 327 Union St., Mishawaka. Event at 6:20 p.m. for single professional women ages 29-41 and men 31-45. Event at 8:30 p.m. for all single professionals 26-39.

Register at www.cupid.com/predating.

"If you go to a bar, you really don't know if who you're flirting with is single or taken or what. (With speed dating), you know everyone is available and they're looking for someone," he says.

Williams jumped into online personals a couple of years ago but says that can be a slow process ending in a first-date clunker. He can tell if he has chemistry with someone in the first few minutes -- and that's why speed dating seems like a great idea.

"This is (2006)," he says, "This is our way of meeting people."

While speed dating hasn't always been an easy sell in this area, Cupid.com is promising a successful event.

"You know what's helping totally is that it's in so many movies and TV shows," Cupid.com event coordinator Courtney King-Sampson says. "(It) started in all the major cities, and now they're moving into the smaller markets."

In fact, Between the Buns in Osceola ran successful speed-dating nights almost monthly for about a year and a half. The restaurant management eventually canceled it because the occasional no-shows and the cost of advertising were a big burden for a small business.

"Everybody who ever attended had a fabulous time," organizer Dave Pestrak says. "It went very well. I know of at least two couples who met there and got married, and a few more that dated for quite some time."

One of those lucky pairs are newlyweds Will and Jen Miller, who married in September. Jen says she was absolutely skeptical about speed dating, but needless to say, "It worked out fabulously." To all potential speed daters, she offers this advice:

"Just do it! It's a two-hour thing. What's the worst that can happen? It was huge how much you can tell (about someone) in just a few minutes."

According to Cupid.com, more than two-thirds of participants come away with at least one match. If all goes well at the Phoenix and Union Station, that's a lot of Valentine's dates.

As for Williams, he chuckles when asked if one is all he's hoping for.

"Oh, I'm greedier than that. I'm hoping to find three people to go on a real date with," he says.

If you don't smoke and you like to laugh, you just might be his girl.

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