

## Area singles pay to play the dating game

By Donna Porstner  
Staff Writer

STAMFORD — Ray Daneault, a divorced maintenance company owner from Milford, never had trouble getting dates, so he shrugged off the suggestion of a matchmaker when he met Diane Gagliano of Great Date Now Inc. last fall.

"I said my schedule was already full of dates. I don't have time," Daneault, 51, recalls. "She said, 'Exactly. You haven't found the right one.'"

He signed up in November, plunking down the \$1,995 membership fee that guaranteed him 10 introductions.

The third time was the charm. This Valentine's Day he is celebrating with his girlfriend of three months, Kathy, an office manager for a Greenwich investment firm.

"I'm a skeptic. I would have been someone who said there is absolutely no way I would buy a date," Daneault said. "I'm a convert. I told them to find me somebody my best friend would set me up with, and that's what they did."

Daneault told the matchmaker what he was looking for — a professional, nonsmoker; a feminine "girlie girl" around his age who didn't want children but would get along well with his three teenage children.

"I got exactly what I ordered," he said.

It was an instant love connection. His first date with Kathy — lunch at a French restaurant in Fairfield — lasted three hours.

Rachel, a 27-year-old financial analyst from Stamford, signed on with Great Date Now last week in hopes of finding a husband.

"It's a lonely time," she said of the days leading up to the Valentine's holiday. "I was in a five-year relationship. I have been single for about a year, and I want to get married."

When she goes to bars with friends, most of the men she meets are younger and not looking for a serious relationship, and she does not want to date someone at work. When she read about Great Date Now in a magazine, she was intrigued by the idea of matchmaker steering her toward men ready to settle down. A friend who heard about it on the radio urged her to give it a shot.

Like many clients of matchmakers, Rachel — who asked to be identified by her first name only — doesn't want to publicize that she's seeking professional help in the dating department.

"A lot of people will say, 'I met through my friend Gary,'" Great Date Now owner Gary Ferone said. "It's an ego thing."

But Ferone said clients shouldn't be ashamed. Seeking a little help with dating should be considered no different than getting a landscaper to work in your yard or hiring a nanny to look after your children.

Rachel, who didn't want to post her picture on a dating Web site announcing to the world she is "on the market," said the confidentiality and the background checks done by the staff sold her on the service.

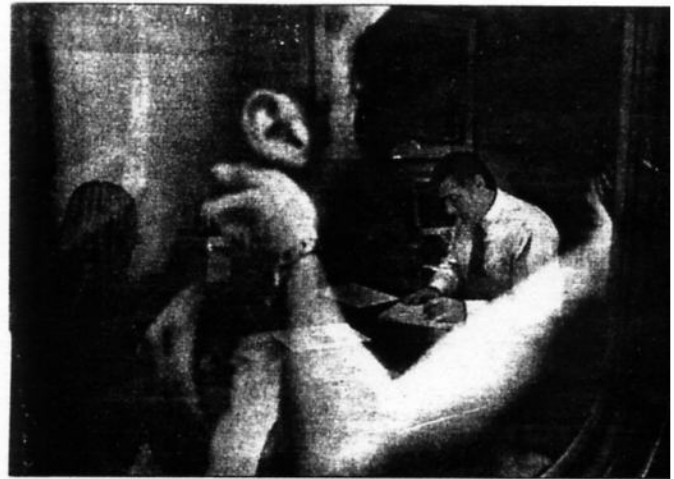
Although there are no promises of wedded bliss, matchmakers such as Janis Spindel of Manhattan's Upper East Side, measure their success in trips down the aisle.

"I just had six guys get engaged over Christmas, which brings me up to 724 marriages to date," she said. "I have a clairvoyant, sixth sense without a doubt. I just know who goes with who."

Spindel, who plans to speak at Stamford's Jewish Community Center next month, signs on male clients from throughout the country who take her on a simulated date in New York. If they want to retain her services, they must fly her and an assistant to them and meet with them for three to five days on their home turf.

Spindel estimates she has 1,800 to 2,000 clients from Westchester County, N.Y., and Fairfield County in her database.

After getting to know a client, Spindel pairs him with women who have paid \$500 to \$1,000 to be listed in her database. There is no guarantee that women who pay the fee will be matched with anyone. Her male clients, who pay upward of \$50,000, include residents of Westport and Fair-



Andrew Sullivan/Staff photo  
Gary Ferone, right, owner of Great Date Now, meets with Rachel, Stamford financial analyst who asked to be identified only by her first name, as she begins her search for a mate.

field, Spindel said.

"One guy is Harvard-educated, Brandeis undergrad, and the other is a big, hot-shot doctor," she said. "I hand-hold very powerful men the whole way."

Because their clients tend to be successful in their professions, matchmakers often promise to be discrete. Some claim to work with celebrities, though they don't name names.

Lisa Ronis, a New York City matchmaker and image coach who hosts a television series, "Manhattan Matchmaker" debuting on Canadian television this spring, said many of her clients are busy professionals who want someone to do the leg-work.

Many are successful women who focused on their careers rather than dating and call when they hear their biological clocks ticking.

"The 35-year-old girl who's never been married, who's a partner in an investing firm, wants to speed things up," Ronis said. "Working with me changes the dynamics because the girls know their phones are going to ring."

Ferone started Great Date Now about two years ago in Mamaroneck, N.Y., with his wife, Lisa, whom he met through Match.com, on the hunch that

singles in suburban Westchester and Fairfield counties need a little more help than their urban counterparts, who have more venues for meeting people.

Great Date Now has separate databases for clients looking for marriage and children, client looking for marriage without children and clients looking for committed relationship without marriage. About 70 percent of his customers are ages 30 to 50. About half have been married.

Ferone turns away 35 percent of prospective clients. He won't take on clients who are recently divorced or widowed and not ready for a relationship, or those with unrealistic expectations about dating someone decades younger. He'll also say no to people looking for others with specific religious preferences that cannot find, or are so physically unappealing that they would be hard to match.

"I'm not a dating service. I'm a matchmaker. I'd rather not introduce you to anybody than introduce you to a warm body with a ticking heart," he said. "Basically, if you can't find a date on your own, I'm not going to be able to help you. If you can find a date, I can help you find the right one."