

# I Gave Match.com a Chance

A foray into the world of online dating taught me about myself and others.

BY CARLA JEAN WHITLEY

**I TOLD A FRIEND LAST WEEK** that I met my boyfriend on match.com, and her reaction caught me by surprise: “It seems like that’s how everyone meets these days.”

Maybe I shouldn’t have been taken off guard; my boyfriend and I are one of three couples in our social circle who met through that online dating site. Murray and Shayne met in 2011, became engaged 10 months later and were married in May 2013. (You can read their story in the winter/spring issue of Birmingham Weddings and Celebrations.) Holly and Brad met in 2012, rented a house together in 2013 and became engaged six months later. And Put and I have been going strong since our first date on Sept. 3, 2012.

But online dating didn’t seem so commonplace when I first signed up for Match. It was 2005, and I knew I needed to push myself to date more. I didn’t date in college or most of grad school, partly because the prevailing attitude around me was that you needed to be prepared to marry a person before you ever went on a first date. That sort of thinking was paralyzing; my girl friends and I placed way too much emphasis on every interaction with a man, and the men rarely asked us out. (And with that “do you think you’ll marry him!?” attitude, I don’t blame them.)

It wasn’t until I was out of school that I realized what an opportunity I had missed. So much of college is learning about yourself, getting to know who you are and how you interact with the world around you. By isolating myself from dating relationships, I’d lost out on

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that chance. And so I cautiously signed up for Match, hoping that it would help me learn how to meet and interact with men outside of the campus ministry setting I’d been in.

I never expected my foray into online dating—first with Match, but also with eHarmony, Chemistry and a handful of other sites—to amount to much. In fact, I jokingly referred to it as “training wheels for dating.” Sorting through profiles helped me separate the “no ways” from the “hmmm, maybes” before we ever met in person. (If only every interaction came with that filter!) And I quickly found that I was asked out more “in real life” when I was actively using online dating services. Why? Well, I think I was more open to the experience. With practice, I learned that a first date isn’t a big deal, and a second date doesn’t have to be, either. Relationships are a serious matter, don’t get me wrong. But casual dating helped me loosen up.

I continued to dabble in online dating over the years that followed, and in September 2012 I hit the jackpot. While browsing search results, one picture caught my eye. I clicked on his profile, and the phrase “NPR junkie” leapt out at me. I hit the “wink” button before I even finished reading Put’s profile, although I was pleased to see that the rest of it was just as promising. Within a day, he emailed me. By the end of our first date, I asked him out again for the next night. And within weeks, Put and I realized how many times we had barely missed each other: We attended the same church for three years and worked in the same building for four. I had known one of his family friends since 2006, and his step-mother and I had at least 50 friends in common. But it took the Internet to bring us together.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if we had met through more traditional means. To be honest, I’m not sure we would have so quickly connected; we’re both introverts with a tendency to clam up in large groups. Online dating may not be for everyone. But it helped me learn how to meet men and broke down the degrees of separation between me and the best man I know. ■

## Tips for Online Dating

**Be a bargain hunter:** Most dating websites will offer occasional periods of “free communication” (often around holidays). You’re also likely to receive emailed discounts if you register for a site but don’t immediately become a paid subscriber.

**Take advantage of free trials:** Many sites offer some sort of incentive, encouraging users to test them out. Create your profile, then let the matches build up before initiating the trial. This way, you’re able to jump straight into communication instead of using your free time browsing.

**Know what you want:** Some sites provide users with matches. Others allow you to conduct the search. Either way, sifting through candidates can be time consuming, so it helps to know your non-negotiables.

**Create a separate email account for your dating mail:** This will help you stay organized and, if you aren’t ready to tell the world you’re online, it also reduces the chances you’ll out yourself while reading your regular email.

**Do your homework:** Most dating sites allow you to create a profile or search before you pay. This can help you determine which site offers the most promising potential matches before you commit your money.

**Be honest—both about who you are and what you look like:** The truth comes out quickly once you meet, and deception is a sure-fire way to ensure you won’t get a second date.

**Be smart:** Online dating sometimes makes it easier to screen out weirdos than meeting someone in a more traditional way. Even so, it’s wise to meet in a public place and let your friends know you’re going out with someone new.

**Enjoy yourself!** Dating is supposed to be fun. Relax and enjoy the process of getting to know someone new.

