

## BONDINGS

Andrea Smith



# Head-hunters for the heart

**Having found love together, Jennifer Haskins and Bill Phelan are now using their own experiences to help others find romance**

**S** EVEN years ago, Jennifer Haskins was startled when her mother announced that a strange man was coming up the garden path, and was even more shocked when she realised that it was Bill Phelan, whom she was due to meet a while later for dinner. It was only their first date, and the enterprising Bill had decided to look up her address and pick her up, so Jennifer had to rush out to the car. She didn't want to unveil him to her entire family at that early point in the proceedings.

Bill was 55 and Jennifer was 44 when they first met through mutual friends in The Gables in Foxrock. As they got talking, they found they had a lot of common ground, as both had been married previously, were parents, and had run successful businesses.

On the romantic side, they were both looking to meet someone, and would later discover they were members of the same dating agency, Who's Who For The Unattached. They hadn't been considered as a potential match by the agency which, they suspect, was because of the 11-year age difference between them.

When they first met, Bill found Jennifer attractive, but it was more important to him that she was both interesting to be with and interested in him. She found him very funny and easy-going, and confesses that while she "wasn't bowled over initially," and was definitely planning to overhaul his wardrobe, the rest had potential.

"She thought, 'Ah he'll be no trouble,'" says Bill, the joker, who has five children, Emma, Sarah, David, Marcus and Alex from his marriage, which ended 12 years ago. Now a grandfather of two, the Blackrock man is the eldest of the late Frank and Teresa Phelan's three chil-



**TWO'S COMPANY:** Jennifer Haskins and Bill Phelan found romance and now help others through their dating agency. The two met through mutual friends. Photo: Tony Gavin

dren. His parents worked in the family's automotive business, and he studied commerce at UCD, and then worked as a chartered surveyor with Lisney before setting up his own business, The Phelan Partnership. He was involved in commercial property investments here and abroad, but closed the business when the recession hit or, as he puts it, "When the Feds let Lehman's go down the tubes in 2008."

He then decided to investigate the idea of opening up a dating agency with Jennifer, who had founded a biscuit and cake company called Handmade Foods and ran it for 23 years. She initially started it from home, but it grew into a very successful business, employing 12 people and supplying many major stores. After she sold the company, she moved into the areas of training and coaching.

Growing up in Cabra as the youngest of three, Jennifer says she was a little wild as a teenager and was dying to go out and live her

*"We want our clients to enjoy the experience, first and foremost"*

life. When she announced that she wanted to get married at 18, her mum Kathleen, a nurse's aide, and late father Edward, who worked in the motor industry, weren't thrilled about it, believing she was too young. By the time she was 21, Jennifer had two children, Kevin, now 34, and Sarah, 32. Her marriage ended after 10 years, and she also has a daughter, Shauna, 19, from a subsequent relationship.

Starting a dating agency appealed to her, as she was interested in human behaviour and, over the years, had completed a spiritual development course, become a reiki master, and studied holistic psychotherapy, counselling, neuro-linguistic programming and hypnosis.

She had also badly damaged her ankle while rollerblading and spent three months in hospital, which gave her lots of time to think about the direction she wanted her life to

take. While in hospital, she read an article about a woman who started a dating agency, which inspired her to join Who's Who.

Things moved quickly for Jennifer and Bill once they met. After six months, Bill got down on one knee outside Bleinheim Palace in England, and asked her to move in with him. They have no plans to get married, as they are very happy as they are.

"Jennifer is caring and loving," says Bill, when asked what he likes about her. "It's all a package and it's wonderful."

They set up Two's Company four-and-a-half years ago, as they felt they could put the dating experience they had gained themselves to good use. They also realised that many people found meeting others through the social scene or the Internet to be a minefield. The business was slow to take off, but has now built up to a thriving agency, and they believe it is very important to run it honourably and ethically.

They cover the 32 counties and spend up to two hours with each potential client, and are always honest about whether they feel they can match someone within their agency.

They are discerning and keep a strict 50:50 ratio between men and women on their books, so at times there is a waiting list for women to join. They don't believe in wasting people's time, operate a strict policy of confidentiality and discretion, and have clients on their books ranging in age from 28 to 78.

Last Christmas alone, they celebrated six engagements from matches that they had made, plus another one in February, and they say it's the personal touch that makes the difference.

Describing themselves as head-hunters for the heart, they get to know their clients, and take great pride in being able to look after them to the best of their abilities.

"We want our clients to enjoy the experience first and foremost," says Jennifer, "and to go away saying that they met some really lovely people. We're not so much a dating agency as 'a possibility of a long-term relationship' agency."

For further information on Two's Company, please visit [www.twoscompany.ie](http://www.twoscompany.ie), or call 01 430 4017

## MID-LIFE CRISIS



Brendan O'Connor

## When dating was about crowd control

**I** THINK I really only went on one proper date. You remember how it used to be. You met people. And maybe there was a spark. And then you met them a few more times. Maybe you would slightly go out of your way to meet them, and you both might go to a certain event, knowing you would meet each other. But you always kept the cover of the event and of other people. There would often be drink involved as well. I say often. I think the word I am looking for is always.

And then, at some point, after you had bumped into each other and got off with each other — and possibly more — a certain number of times, you might settle into a relationship of sorts. But you would never really do things together, just the two of you, until you were well settled and knew each other well. And even then, you might initially go to the cinema, so that you wouldn't have to talk for 90 minutes of the evening. In those days, films were all only 90 minutes bar the odd one, like *Gandhi* or that. But no one went to see those ones.

Outside of the cinema, there would still often be drink involved to jolly things along. Again, I think I may be misusing the word often there.

I don't remember the actual details of the proper date forensically. Roughly speaking, it was some girl I was trying to get off with, that I knew from around, and for whatever reason we were both otherwise occupied on the night out in question. I believe there may have been drink involved. I also think, but I can't be sure, that she might have been testing me. You can't have me now, but will you still want me tomorrow?

So, we went for a few drinks, obviously. And, freaked out by the intimacy of sitting there with a stranger, I babbled on and on, telling stupid stories about me and my friends that weren't funny to this girl or, possibly, anyone else. I think I remembered to ask her about herself. Then we both bailed and spent the rest of the evening elsewhere.

I should say that I have very few vivid memories of that whole period of my life. But

as I sit here pulling out that particular memory, I find the flashbacks to the awkwardness come easily and vividly.

I'd say that was my last and only real proper date, where both of us came cold to it without a history. But, in fact, now that I think of it, I think we had actually briefly kissed the night before the date. ~ But that momentum was gone the night of the date. We should have kissed 10 times, and possibly more, before going on the date.

After that, I went back to letting the community, and the drink, throw me together with women, to the safety of crowds. I never again tried to separate a woman from the herd too early on in the process. It's just not the Irish way.

I feel sorry for people these days because, from what I hear, the community does not find people for you anymore. And neither does it provide that cover you need for the relationship to have its initial blossom, safe in the crowd.