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Mt. Airy dating columnist one of 22 siblings



This photo was taken during a wedding of one of Chelsea's sisters this past August. It was taken on the steps of their parents' house in Mt. Airy.

by JOEL HOFFMANN

Chelsea Badeau, 27, never claimed to be an expert on dating. She doesn't have a Ph.D. in psychology or a "Sex and the City" pedigree, and when she took the assignment, the graduate of Henry Elementary School in Mt. Airy and the High School for the Creative and Performing Arts in center city was soon to be married. Her column, "Chelsea's Corner," was born of necessity.

In the fall of 2004, her boss at Comcast, Jonathan Leeds (a resident of Chestnut Hill), was looking for someone to add fresh content to the Web site's relationship channel (romance section).

Chelsea was the relationships editor at the time. She figured she could handle it. If an answer didn't come to mind readily, she could draw on the experience of her friends and family — and that's a lot of experience since her family in Mt. Airy consisted of 21 brothers and sisters! (That is not a typo.)

Readers responded to Chelsea's down-to-earth advice by flooding her inbox. "The things people will say to you — to a complete stranger, which is what I was to them — are amazing," she says.

Most readers just wanted dating advice, but some were more demanding. "I did get a number of date requests," she says, smiling.

One admirer even wrote her a song, which he posted on his Web site. It had no words, but Chelsea could tell it was a love ballad.

She politely declined the requests, preserving the deli-

cate balance of the quasi-shrink, cyber-client relationship. The majority of her readers respected that balance. They were content with sharing their favorite clips with friends through their blogs and MySpace pages.

Chelsea's piece titled "Do Nice Guys Finish Last?" was especially resonant in the blogosphere. She wrote it for men who were sick of women dismissing them despite their chivalrous advances. After reviewing the evidence at hand — namely, her readers' stories — Chelsea concluded that nice guys do "stand a chance."

She continued: "So, to every nice guy that's staying true to his heart and not changing his nature to attract women who can't appreciate him, I say cheers! Keep your head up. Continue to hold doors and pull out chairs. Your time will come, and your niceness will be rewarded with a fulfilling relationship with a 'nice girl!'"

For once, nice guys were vindicated.

Chelsea enjoyed giving advice, but she retired the column in June of this year. She had been promoted to managing editor of Comcast.net in late 2006, and her career was blooming.

Her success is rooted in rich soil. Chelsea grew up in Fairelawn Manor, a sprawling stone mansion that stands at the intersection of Cresheim and Pelham roads in Mt. Airy. Before her family moved there in 1992, Fairelawn Manor was a Bed and Breakfast, and before that it was a convent.

Fairelawn's monastic past is evident the second you step inside. The main staircase climbs toward a stained-glass

tableau from the Middle Ages, a scene of Christian knights campaigning for fallen souls. At the base of the steps, off to the left, the Blessing of St. Francis is set above a brick and wrought-iron fireplace. Printed in red gothic script, the prayer asks the Lord for peace and salvation.

Although it's a private home, Fairelawn still has a holy ambiance. Compassion and charity seem to live and breathe within its walls. Chelsea's parents, Hector and Susan, raised 22 children at Fairelawn. (Susan is the executive director for the Philadelphia Children's Commission.) When her parents lived in New England, they adopted José from El Salvador and conceived Chelsea and Isaac. Over the years, they adopted another 19 children. (In 1999, one brother, Adam, died of Sanfilippo syndrome, a rare neurological disorder that devastates the body. He was 11 years old.)

The youngest of the 21 living children is 17, the oldest 39. One often-asked question is: How can anyone not named Bill Gates possibly afford to raise so many children, considering the cost of food, clothing, medical care, etc.? Susan's answer: "A few of our adult kids with disabilities receive SSI. When they were younger, a few of our kids with disabilities received a benefit called an Adoption Subsidy, which is designed to help support kids with disabilities being adopted out of foster care. But people cannot get both SSI and Adoption Subsidy at the same time, so they got one or the other. And the Adoption Subsidy ends when they are 18, or it ends sooner if they are out

of school, but all of our kids except Aaron stayed in school at least until 18 so that was not an issue. Even though more than half of our kids have special needs, never did more than half of them get any kind of benefits. Some just never qualified for one reason or other."

Chelsea says that her family and her faith are a constant source of inspiration. It's clear that she has taken the Sermon on the Mount to heart. "I think my motivating desire in life is to make things better than they were when I came," she says.

That desire consumes much of her time. Chelsea typically spends two or three nights and a weekend day volunteering in and around Mt. Airy. Her current home on Greene Street is just a few minutes from her beloved childhood home.

As a planning-committee member of Girls Exploring Tomorrow's Technologies, she touts the importance of technological literacy and urges young women to pursue careers traditionally held by men. As a board member for West Mt. Airy Neighbors, she serves on the Web and "Eat Your Heart Out" event committees. As a student in Leadership Philadelphia's class of 2007, she is creating places for children to rest and play in Philadelphia's family courts.

Before she shares her time with others, though, Chelsea has to meet the demands of her job and care for her two-year-old daughter, Chloe. As managing editor for Comcast.net, Chelsea coordinates Web content with the Associated Press, Fancast and E! online, among others, and searches for more content providers to bring aboard.

Chelsea says the job is sometimes challenging, but she loves working for Comcast. The perks are exquisite, like free magazines and free Comcast service, but most of all she loves Comcast because her producers (including Chestnut Hill's Jonathan Leeds) encourage new ideas.

Chelsea's father, Hector, watches Chloe and his children at the mansion while she works, but afterward Chelsea spends as much time as she can with Chloe and her husband, Lashon, a manager at North by Northwest in Mt. Airy. (On Dec. 19, Chelsea and Lashon celebrated their third wedding anniversary.)

Because Chelsea is critical of the covert racism and sexism that she sees in children's film and television content, she strives to create a stimulating



Chelsea, who grew up in Mt. Airy, near her current home, with 21 siblings, is seen here with her daughter, Chloe, who will be three years old on Jan. 20. (Photo by Joel Hoffmann)

environment for Chloe by other means. (Chelsea is critical for good reason. She studied video communications at Arcadia University, and she wrote her senior thesis about the subtle condescension toward women and minorities that she found in Disney movies.)

Chelsea says it's hard to shelter her daughter from Disney, especially when many girls Chloe's age are mesmerized by the empire. Instead, Chelsea often reads to Chloe. "She can tell me the whole story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears without the book in front of her," she says. "She understands a lot, too much actually ... I need to watch myself."

Chelsea is grateful for all that she's learned from the struggles of her many siblings. She says that helping her parents care for them has made her a better person. Someday, she wants to collaborate with her mother on a book about their family. She says that Mt. Airy is a suitable setting for such a story because of its diversity. After all, it was diversity and open-mindedness that brought Susan and Hector Badeau to Mt. Airy in the first place.

In the meantime, Chelsea will gather more stories, gain more wisdom and continue to reach out to those in need around Philadelphia. Philadelphia is a wonderful place to live, she says. "I'm committed to trying to make it better for future generations."

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