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Shari Mendelson and Stephen Kautz at a North Jersey

# Young singles finally find a group that fits

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The crowd was sort of stumbling through the tune.

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear ..."

Wait — whose birthday was it again?

Daniel Hedden didn't care that most of the 30 people celebrating his 26th at Morton's Steakhouse in Hackensack last month didn't know his name. All that really mattered was being surrounded by contemporaries.

"It's kind of tough to meet new people my age," Hedden said between conversations during the event sponsored by the New Jersey Young Professionals, a social networking organization with thousands of members in their 20s and early 30s.

The free Yahoo members group was started in February 2004 by Laura Occhipinti after a new job forced her to relocate from Waldwick to North Plainfield, leaving most of her friends

Like many twentysomethings in the suburbs, Occhipinti found it difficult to meet new young people. Through Yahoo's members pages, she organized a happy-hour event at a Bridgewater restaurant and bar. The strangers who joined her group seemed friendly online, but Occhipinti was nervous.

"Sitting behind the computer is easy, but actually meeting people is difficult," said Occhipinti, 28.

To Occhipinti's relief, 10 "nice" and "normal" people showed up. All spoke of the difficulty of meeting twenty- and thirtysomethings in the area. The next event drew the same 10 people — plus many of their friends. Soon, other members began organizing events, and the draw increased exponentially.

In little more than a year, word-of-mouth gained North Jersey Young Professionals more than 3,100 members. Members organize five or six events each week throughout the state.

On Wednesday, the group held a shindig at Chakra in Paramus as part of a recent effort to See **SINGLES** Page F-2

## Singles: Organization helps young professionals connect

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expand membership in Bergen County, where events this summer have drawn 15 to 40 people. Parties in areas where the group has hosted more events can draw more than 100 twenty- and thirtysomethings.

The group's popularity is no surprise to Hedden, a Bloomfield resident.

Outside of college towns and Hoboken, suburban neighborhoods are home to relatively few singles, he said. As a result, socializing with neighbors is sometimes difficult.

Hedden has the added problem of working for himself as a photographer with his own studio. Without co-workers, it is difficult to meet new people in general and other young people in particular. His clients are often 10 to 15 years his senior, he said.

Other members echoed problems of socializing with co-workers, saying their employers frown upon inter-office dating, and

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ERIC CAMERON, LYNDHURST

their New Jersey offices were too small to have many people their own age.

"These events are perfect for me really," Hedden said of the North Jersey Young Professionals gatherings, which typically include after-work happy hours at restaurants, bike rides, Sunday brunches and board game get-togethers.

Lynhurst resident Eric Cameron, 28, joined the organization after friends sent him an online invitation to a happy-hour event. He found the willingness of members to meet new people a refreshing change from the bar scene, where he says people so-

cialize with only those they want to hit on.

"The bar scene is really shallow. Everybody focuses on the 10 really hot guys and 10 really hot women. Here, there is less pressure and fewer cliques," said Cameron, a computer programming instructor at Passaic County Community College in Paterson.

Without New Jersey Young Professionals, he said, he wouldn't have many socializing options. Most of his married friends don't go to bars, and becoming friendly with students is an ethics violation. He tried Internet dating but had bad experiences. One girl stole his passport. Another cried all the time.

"This is really nice because there is always something to do," he said, adding that he has met many new friends.

Leilani Fallon, a Princeton resident who describes her age as "29-plus," likes the bar scene but says the group events are a welcome change that allow her to meet different kinds of people.

"I think it's a great opportunity for people to meet others, network and socialize," Fallon said.



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Pour the wine and they will come: New Jersey Young Professionals grew like a snowball rolling down a hill.