FOUNDER OF THE DUBAI-BASED COMMUNITY PLATFORM SOCIAL LEAGUE, WHICH FOSTERS AUTHENTIC IN-PERSON CONNECTIONS AMONG PROFESSIONALS, **LAALEEN SUKHERA** DELVES INTO THE ART OF CREATING MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS



‘Be the kind of person you wish to attract’

BY SOMYA MEHTA

In the culture of swiping and scrolling, finding joy in face-to-face connections is becoming an elusive concept. Entrenched in ‘This could be a text’ and green flag vs. red flag memes, the search for love and romantic connections seems to have entered an algorithmic terrain—guided by the logic of a thinking mind rather than the instinct of a feeling mind. As a result, the idea of putting ourselves out there to "find love" is becoming increasingly daunting for many. But ultimately, it is at the risk of vulnerability and heartbreak that one finds the reward of a lifetime, believes Dubai-based lifestyle consultant Laaleen Sukhera. "To meet the right person, we have to put ourselves out there in a tasteful way. They won’t get delivered through Amazon or Noon, tied up in a bow," as she candidly puts it.

However, even if one decides to put themselves out there, where do they begin? To make this process easier, the British expat came up with Social League—a Dubai-based community platform designed to encourage authentic, in-person connections among professionals seeking meaningful bonds that go beyond fleeting digital interactions. As Laaleen puts it, “Social League is designed to be the antidote to swipe culture.”

Come Valentine’s Day, when the collective quest to be daring and seek love *again* sees a sharp rise, we sit down with the lifestyle consultant and ‘social connector’, as she likes to address herself, to uncover the unspoken challenges of finding love in a metropolis like Dubai, how her platform bridges this gap, and some of her most memorable success stories, helping people in their 50s and 60s find fulfilling relationships.

Edited excerpts from an interview:

Tell us about yourself. What shaped your early interests?

I’m a lifelong writer, seasoned communications professional, eclectic events expert and a public speaker. I was born in Lahore, Pakistan, as a third-generation Brit and completed my education there and in the United States. I’m a mother of three and my marriage ended eight years ago. I can empathise with people who are single, married, divorced, and single parents as I’ve lived all of this in my adult life. I have an open, straightforward personality and many people naturally confide in me. I’m honoured to be trusted by so many and I don’t take it lightly or judge them.

> “Dating with intent is all about quality, not quantity. Instead of swiping on a dozen digital profiles a day that may leave you feeling empty, focus on a few real-life matches with the right criteria”

Why did you want to pursue matchmaking as an alternate career?

It happened quite by chance. I’m a natural connector and I happen to be quite good at it. It was only a matter of time before I got certified and began the official journey. The irony is that I’m single myself — but this is only because I make mindful choices, and don’t want to rush it with the wrong person. I’m an infinite romantic and I find that I live vicariously through the couples I introduce in a somewhat fairy-godmother-like way.

How was Social League born?

Whether it’s reading books or attending a themed gathering, when something I like doesn’t exist, I create it. When I moved to Dubai, I already had friends who were understandably socialising as married couples. To expand my circle, I joined social activity groups. However, I found that they weren’t exactly discerning with their guest lists. The mix was often awkward, with people who had nothing in common and wildly different age groups, too. The organisers often neglected to make personal introductions, and it made the experience less comfortable.

So, I decided to host my own events that I could at least enjoy and found myself becoming more of a planner than a guest participant. At the very first gathering, we had fifty single professionals show up, equal numbers of ladies and gentlemen, and so much great conversation. I’ve made some of my closest friends through Social League, and although it’s a lot of hard work, I love every bit of it.

Living in a city like Dubai comes with many benefits but also has its own caveats. What are some key challenges of finding a life partner in a metropolitan city?

We lead digital lifestyles for the most part and tend to interact more online than in person. We’ll DM on Instagram instead of using our phones for actual phone calls, for instance. People in metropolitan cities lead busy lives with long commutes and tend to rely on dating apps. When dating apps started, they were an innovative way to meet people from beyond immediate circles, but they’ve taken on a whole new level of commercialism now. After all, apps were created to become addictive — they’re a business, much like gaming.

In an age where the majority of interactions are shifting online and in-person contact is diminishing, what impact has this had on finding fulfilling partnerships?

It’s becoming increasingly challenging to cultivate a quality relationship in the digital age, where people assume there are endless alternatives. As a result, meeting a potential match has turned into a numbers game devoid of genuine human connection — and that’s not helping. This swipe-and-discard culture doesn’t favour long-term relationships. AI-enhanced texting, scammers, catfishers, transactional arrangements, and MBAs (married-but-available) have all contributed to widespread dating app fatigue.

Interestingly, major app developers are now investing in real-life events to bring people together. I attended the GDI London Conference 2024 (Global Dating Insights) as the only representative from our region. As an entrepreneurial dolphin navigating an ocean-sized industry of whales and sharks, I realised that Social League was already ahead of the curve in fostering real-world connections!

Walk us through how your process of connecting individuals works.

As a lifestyle consultant, I take on clients for bespoke introductions. It starts with a complimentary video call where I learn about them with a series of confidential questions. If we are in alignment, I invite them to take on consulting services. It’s an unhurried process with curated introductions that occur at a time and place of their convenience. Many people are busy business travellers who really appreciate the time and effort it takes to support their personal goals.

What has been your biggest success story?

I’ve been a connector playing Cupid my

whole life, years before I became a certified matchmaker. My biggest success story happened in my twenties when I introduced my two good friends. Today, they are happily married with three children.

While dating can be tough to navigate at any age, Social League especially looks at the demographic of 30+. What are some challenges that come with finding romantic relationships as we age?

I've noticed that men and women become more similar as we age. My clients and community members have so much in common. Topmost on their list for partners: to be educated and cultured; to possess a balanced personality aka 'no drama'; to have financial stability - women, in particular, are reluctant to fund a partner if he is unsuccessful; the ability to enjoy a home life while having healthy outdoor pursuits and to enjoy travel; to be physically active – non-smokers are particularly sought after. Ethnicity, nationality, and faith tend to fall much lower on the average list.

Dubai puts us on even ground. Women are every bit as successful as men here. Many of my clients and community members are widowed and single parents, or those seeking to start a family. People often realise, as they grow older—particularly those who have divorced individuals from their own countries—that similarities in lifestyles and values matter more to them than where they were born or the hue of their complexion.

How does it feel to witness meaningful connections blossom through Social League, especially among individuals in their 50s, and 60s? Can you share any memorable stories?

As a connector, I enjoy bringing genuinely good people together, helping destiny along, as it were. There are several people who have met through my introductions this past year and two couples I'd like to mention here.

One couple—both single parents in the 40s to 50s age group, from different countries but sharing a similar faith—are engaged to be married! When I saw their proposal photos, I cried with happiness.

Another couple, both goodhearted and accomplished people, are from different continents with different ethnicities and completely different professions, in the 50s to 60s age group. And yet they are wonderfully compatible and perhaps wouldn't have met through normal circumstances.

From your observations, what have you learned about finding love in a city like Dubai?

As a lifestyle consultant, I realise that just like any other big cosmopolitan metropolis, finding and maintaining quality connections comes with its challenges. Building a community helps with this. Dubai is very welcoming, hospitable, and exciting, provided you surround yourself with the right people and positive opportunities that help you grow as a person.

Loneliness is also a growing concern in modern society. How has your platform helped individuals navigate the feeling of loneliness?

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Many of us are single by circumstance until we meet the right person. But to meet the right person, we have to put ourselves out there in a tasteful way. They won't get delivered through Amazon or Noon tied up in a bow. Also, remember that you aren't alone in feeling this way. Social League is your tribe if you want to meet people you can relate to and share humour and insights with. So, get off your couch and sign up.

If a person is single, but unsure of finding the right partner, what advice would you give them?

Love yourself first and live a fulfilling life before inviting someone to be a part of it. We often place too much pressure on potential partners to fill a sense of emptiness, which can be unfair to them and negatively impact the relationship.

Be the kind of person you wish to attract. If you want to be with someone joyful, physically fit and financially stable, follow those habits in your daily life, too. If you're serious about meeting your future partner, show the universe you're ready through action and intent, and things will happen for you.

Dating with intent is all about quality, not quantity. Instead of swiping on a dozen digital profiles a day that may leave you feeling empty, focus on a few real-life matches with the right criteria. Sign up for activity groups, work on your mental and physical health, and network among quality people.

Instead of succumbing to social pressure to meet and marry quickly, relationship experts I work with advise taking time to really get to know one another. Oftentimes there's a personality 'mask' that slips after three months, that's when you really discover who a person is.

Also, it's never too late to rediscover love. No matter your age, there is someone out there who is compatible with you—you just haven't had the opportunity to connect with them yet. It all comes down to timing, being in the right circles, and having the right mindset for meaningful introductions.

Even if we generally feel fulfilled in our personal lives, certain times of the year—such as Valentine's Day—can make some of us feel more single than ever. What kinds of events does Social League organise for such occasions?

Singleness hits hardest during the winter months – Christmas, New Year's Eve, Valentine's Day, it's called cuffing season. The deluge of Hallmark-style rom-coms hitting Netflix all winter doesn't help either. Even if we're happy and at peace with being single, we may witness pangs of loneliness during these times.

Social League hosts year-round relaxed get-togethers, currently twice a month, with friendly conversation and bonding among like-minded people of both genders. Next up is our Cupid Social on the day after Valentine's Day, February 15. This time we're inviting both unattached and attached people to celebrate the spirit of social connection at a private members' club. It's a traffic light concept with green, red, and yellow stickers corresponding to their relationship status. Happy couples are a blessing. We're encouraging them to bring their single friends or single family members along, too.

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