

DAILY NEWS

You'll never marry? Quite the contrary

By CHRISTINE B. WHELAN
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When I was 16, I memorized the sheet music to Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You" and gave my crush a Valentine's Day concert. At 23, I baked heart-shaped brownies for my man of the moment - which he enjoyed, but asked why they were shaped funny.

Otherwise, I've spent most Feb. 14s by myself. It doesn't feel terrific. And I know on that score, I am not alone.

But New Yorkers who are moping around this Valentine's Day, jealously eying happy couples, should relax. The sappy pink-and-red hearts in all the Duane Reade windows may make you lose hope that you'll ever find a partner, but the facts tell a different story: Cupid is still alive and well, even here in New York.

Yes, national census data tell us that some 32% of men and 24% of women ages 30 to 34 have yet to marry - nearly a fourfold increase since 1970. But we're not staying single forever; we're just marrying later. Nine out of 10 Americans tie the knot. That's pretty good odds - especially when you factor in gay and lesbian Americans, who in most cases can't legally marry.

And while we may think our city is the worst climate for finding a partner, the odds of getting married are just as high in New York City as in any other big metropolitan area. Plus, since people stay single longer in big cities, the chances you'll meet your match later in life are much higher here than in a small town.

Why are we marrying later? Because, in general, we invest in our careers and education in our 20s instead of organizing a concentrated search for a life partner. Among 30- to 34-year-olds, 59% have now completed at least some college, and nearly one-third have completed a bachelor's degree or more.

So if you talk to men and women in their early 20s, chances are they are single or in a less than serious relationship. But fast-forward two decades, and the odds of marriage shoot up: Among New Yorkers 40 to 44 years old with some college who earn about \$30,000, 86% of women and 80% of men have tied the knot. More education increases those odds. So twentysomethings spending tonight solo might

want to pick up a college course catalogue.

If you're spending tonight with a partner, I guess that makes you a lucky one. Lucky because you'll get a card - 180 million cards will be exchanged today. Lucky because you'll go on a nice date - 44% of Americans will do that tonight. Or lucky because you'll get something that glitters, whether or not it's gold. Jewelry stores nationwide sold more merchandise in February 2005 than in any other month of the year.

And if you're not lucky, just have a little patience. The odds are good that next Valentine's Day you'll get your very own Whitman's Sampler. And in the meantime, don't let Hallmark get you down. Clinical research suggests chocolate is an anti-depressant. Buy lots. And take heart: St. Patrick's Day decorations will go up before you know it.

Whelan is the author of "Why Smart Men Marry Smart Women."