



Following Her Heart

As the owner of the Southwest Florida branches of dating service It's Just Lunch, Lynne Adams helps people find that special someone.

PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BLASE

by Janina Birtolo

Move over, McDonald's. There's a new option for lunch, one that is, in a word, *lovely*. And Lynne Adams is determined to introduce Southwest Floridian singles to the possibilities inherent in that option—and that adjective.

For the past two years, Adams has been the Southwest Florida franchise owner of It's Just Lunch, a dating service with a difference. Started in 1991 in Chicago, IJL bills itself as a fun, proactive approach to first dates for busy professionals. The company's Web site (www.itsjustlunch.com) proudly announces that it has arranged two million first dates in its fourteen years and is responsible for "thousands" of marriages.

Adams knows that's not just hype. She

For Lynne Adams, her job is a perfect match

met her own husband through It's Just Lunch.

"I was living in the DC area at the time and was involved with the Junior League," she recalls. "The director of It's Just Lunch in the area came to one of our lunches and gave a presentation. I was single at the time, and this seemed like a good way to meet people. So I signed up. And I eventually met the gentleman who became my husband."

Looking back, Adams thinks IJL matched her and her husband because of

their similar backgrounds. Both of them grew up in Virginia, were Episcopalian, and worked in technology. Even though they didn't share that many activity preferences, something clicked. "Because so many people are so transient, to have someone who knows where you grew up was very appealing to me," Adams says. "And we were both in the technology industry. Most people outside the industry don't understand what you're talking about."

The match not only led to marriage. It also led to lifestyle and career changes, the first among them a move to Naples three years ago. "All my closest friends from Virginia now live in Florida," Adams explains. "I don't have any sisters, and they are like family to me. I knew I wanted to be close to them. And I was tired of the cold. I felt I needed a

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lifestyle change.”

That change extended beyond the desire for a warm climate and proximity to friends. Adams had been in the technology industry since she graduated from college and was ready for something new. The idea of owning her own business was a tempting prospect. And when she found out the Southwest Florida franchise of It's Just Lunch was available, it seemed like kismet.

“I thought it would be a fun business,” she says. “I think everybody has that matchmaking instinct.”

IJL also had the lure of being essentially a turnkey operation. The folks at franchise headquarters in San Diego provide owners and their employees with training and techniques for interviewing and matchmaking. They also provide advice on office space, operations, and advertising. “They basically hold your hand for the first three months,” Adams says. “After that, they can be as hands-on as you want them to be.”

Adams admits that the business side of her new enterprise has been more intensive than she expected. With offices in Sarasota, Ft. Myers, and Naples, she typically works from 8 a.m. until 9 p.m., Monday through Friday. “I’m passionate about the matchmaking,” she says. “You have to be passionate about what you do. I just wish there were more hours in a day. I’d like to spend more time with family and friends, but I’m still on this learning curve as a business owner. It’s like my baby.”

And the best aspect of that baby, Adams notes, is the chance to bring people together. In just two years, her franchise has attracted more than 750 clients. Each is guaranteed a minimum of fourteen first dates for lunch or something equally casual, like drinks after work.

Each morning, Adams and her staff spend about an hour and a half going through client profiles, looking for commonalities and possible matches. That human touch is what sets IJL apart from other dating services, she believes. “We’re so personalized in our approach,”



Adams and her staff analyze clients' interests and backgrounds to determine possible matches.

PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BLASE

she explains. “We don’t use computers for matching. We do it the old-fashioned way. We try to talk about people’s beliefs and values. I so enjoy almost analyzing relationships, although chemistry is hard to define. And I enjoy the challenge of hearing back from clients whether they did click.”

Once Adams and her staff have decided on promising matches, they go about setting up the first date. They contact the clients, provide them with each other’s first name, and find a mutually agreeable time for a meeting. Then they make reservations at a convenient restaurant, a place that is well known and comfortable. “We try to take as much stress as possible out of that first date,” Adams explains, adding that part of the stresslessening rests in the fact that it’s just lunch. “They have lunch,” she says. “It’s an hour; it has a start and an end.”

Two of Adams’s most ardent supporters are David and Vickie Caputo of Bonita Springs, who married in

November 2003 after meeting through IJL. “I can’t say enough about Lynne and the folks at It’s Just Lunch,” David says. “The way they match you up, the care they take—you just know you’re going to have common interests. They actually sit with every client and interview them. You can be very specific in what you want or open-minded. I just said, ‘Let me meet a real person.’ My wife just happened to be my second date.”

Although delighted that the Caputos became her first match to result in marriage, Adams makes no claims for such instant chemistry. She went on about five lunch dates before meeting her husband, so she knows it can take some time. But client feedback after each lunch helps her and her staff to fine-tune future matches.

Recently, Adams’s new career brought her into a whole new field: putting together a book, *The It’s Just Lunch Guide to Dating in Naples, Ft. Myers & Sarasota*. The general advice in the book (flirting tips, what to talk about on a first date, etc.) was penned through a cooperative effort among the IJL

franchises, but each chapter includes local recommendations for restaurants, gyms, romantic spots, and the like. “I did it with my employees,” Adams says. “We made it our business to visit each place.”

Asked about the future, Adams laughs. “That’s a good question,” she says, “because I live so much in the moment.” A priority, she says, will be to learn her business even better, so she can have more time for family, friends, and sunsets. But there’s one thing of which she’s certain: It’s Just Lunch is here to stay. 🍴

Lynne Adams maintains It’s Just Lunch offices in Ft. Myers (239/939-3900), Naples (239/597-4100), and Sarasota (941/362-7702). For more information on the service, visit www.itsjustlunch.com.

Based in Naples, freelance writer Janina Birtolo has been writing about Southwest Florida for the past fourteen years.



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