

Richard Weiss is a former Member of Parents Without Partners, Inc. and Former President of Greater Northeast Chapter #582, Philadelphia. He may be contacted at RichardPWeiss@aol.com

The Internet Takes a "Byte" Out of PWP
The Story Behind Membership Decline
The Single Parent - Winter 2003
By Richard P. Weiss

To say that membership numbers in Parents Without Partners have dropped in recent years would be an incredible understatement. The nearly 40,000 members PWP had in 1998 dwarf PWP's current membership numbers reaching just barely over the 25,000 mark. At one time, PWP claimed over 250,000 members worldwide.

Why have membership numbers dwindled? Are there less single parents than there used to be?

I have had many conversations with PWP members regarding making sense of declining membership numbers when I was President of the Philadelphia Chapter. Many members suggested that being a single parent is currently more acceptable in our society than it had been in the past. Therefore, even though the number of single parents may not have changed considerably throughout the years, fewer of them feel the need to rely on a single parent support system. This reason may account for the dramatic decrease in memberships from the 80's to the present, however it doesn't explain the recent decline of close to 15,000 members that PWP has lost over the past 5 years.

I believe a fairly recent development within our society has to do with a change in lifestyle that has veered members away from PWP. The Internet has exploded in popularity, especially beginning in the early to mid 90's. The introduction of chat rooms, instant messaging programs, newsgroups and online interest groups have given us a new way to meet people. Unlike any other time in history, we are now afforded the opportunity to meet others from the safe havens of our homes, without the awkwardness associated with encountering strangers face-to-face.

Beginning around 1997, I recall my first experiences logging onto the Internet. I recall how I was one of the first people in my chapter to go online. However, within a year, a greater percentage of members signed on to the "net." As they became hooked on the world of cyberspace, attendance at PWP functions appeared to plummet.

And, why not? The Internet has made it perfectly acceptable to meet total strangers online. Though PWP disclaims itself as a dating service, we must face the fact that many members joined, believing they would meet someone through the group. The advent of

the convenience of meeting people, online, competes heavily with meeting people "the old fashioned way."

The resurgence in the strength of the PWP organization has recently come into play, according to many members, including some International board members (IBOD) with whom I have spoken. Apparently, the Internet has lost some of its original zest; our recovery from the novelty of choosing the sanctity of the Internet over life experiences seems to have halted further drops in memberships. Though going online has its place, logging off and getting out to functions is the best way to restore the stability of PWP.

PWP has assisted hundreds of thousands of single parents since its inception in 1957. Its future can be just as bright if members would not only join, but also become involved in planning and running activities and encouraging younger single parents to join. Showing members the value of a group that understands their struggles as single parents will keep these members interested in their chapter, and prompt them to advertise the chapter to other potential members. Despite a drop in membership over the years, those who have stayed active in PWP have found it to be the single best organization a single parent could ever hope to find, online or off.

If PWP is to survive, it must find innovative ways to draw members and keep them, despite the diversions created by modern technology. The need for interaction and participation of members cannot be overemphasized when building a member base. The development of the Internet is an amazing phenomenon in modern society, however it will never replace the fulfillment of spending time with friends and family, sharing fun times with our children, and dancing with our friends.