

Matchmaker makes perfect pairs at The Palace

BY MONIQUE O. MADAN

It's like high school all over again at The Palace in Coral Gables — butterflies, pop kisses and love songs.

"If you think seniors have resigned themselves to loveless years in their second stage of life, think again," said spokeswoman Vicki Garfinkel.

There is no age limit for friendship and flirting at The Palace, a luxury senior living community in the heart of the Gables. Grandmas and grandpas can be seen roaming the halls holding hands, going on coffee dates and toasting to a glass of wine at happy hour.

Pamela Parker, 64, the social director at The Palace, holds herself responsible for a handful of romances stirring things up.

The skillful matchmaker, as well as the creative force behind the community's smorgasbord of social activities, uses the events she orchestrates to bring friendship and romance to those least expected to find love again.

"They say that if you make a match, you get a space reserved in heaven," said Parker. "And I need all the help I can get."

Victor Esterlitz, 91, and Lea Swetloff, 80, seem to be helping Parker with that.

The inseparable couple connected at a 2013 New Year's Eve gala-turned-pajama party at the senior living home. Parker played cupid.

Esterlitz was one of The Palace's first residents when the community opened in 2013. When Parker saw him dressed in his dinner jacket, she shook her head and told him he was "far too handsome to be sitting alone."

She immediately grabbed Swetloff and had her join the introvert for dinner.

"They just looked right together."

Soon enough, they rang in the year in their pajamas, and seven months later became an official couple.

"The rest is history," Parker said.



Lea Swetloff, 80, and Victor Esterlitz, 91, on the balcony at Lea's residence at The Palace Coral Gables, on Feb. 9, 2015. The couple connected at a 2013 New Year's Eve gala-turned-pajama party at the senior living home.

The couple traveled together to Tanglewood, Mass., in the summer. Their families have blended and have family nights. They are now planning their first cruise. Esterlitz is a former World War II veteran and salesman. Swetloff was a former interior designer, model and artist. She was widowed seven years ago.

"I wasn't looking for anything; it just fell into place," Swetloff said about her beau. "We trust each other; it's a very good friendship... friends come first."

Also on the love train are Joseph Decenzo, 85, and Florence Wolensky, 95, who both share the same interest in music.

They both would arrive early to the community's nightly happy hours to enjoy the live entertainment. They soon began chatting at the happy hour and hit it off.

And then there are the ladies' men, like 88-year-old John Pagliano and 76-year-old Ken Fishman. Both are single and ready to mingle.

Parker has worked as a singer, a party planner, circus clown and entertainer on cruise ships.

"I've done so many things you'd think I couldn't hold a job," she said. "But everything I've done my entire life comes to play here, at The Palace."

Parker said that although she has fun matching up residents, she enjoys bringing "people together in friendship."

"It's sad if people who come here didn't have friends," she said. "If you can find someone to share this beautiful lifestyle with, life is much more meaningful."

Residents are grateful for her passion for others.

"Without Pam, we would never get to meet each other," Esterlitz said.

Parker's response was bashful.

"Yes, I'm certainly responsible for bringing them together at a social situation," she said. "But it's up to them to make the magic. I just stir it up a little bit."