

Date!

Story by Staff Writer Mike Lafona Photographs by Staff Photographer Matthew Scott

Greg Switzer and Katie Contrario started out as friends, spending time together as fellow members of their school track team. As time went on, it gradually dawned on Greg and Katie that their relationship meant something much deeper.

"It just kind of happened. We didn't say, 'We're going out now,'" remarked Greg, a parishioner at St. Michael's Church in Newark. He and Katie, both 15, have been going steady for five months.

The transition to romance seemed to happen almost effortlessly, Greg said, due to the fact that he and Katie had formed such a strong friendship.

"It's easier if you get to know the person first," Greg said. "Then, on the first-date kind of thing, you have things to talk about. You don't just sit there with the other person, not knowing what to say."

Greg's comments might be a little too earnest for guys who view the ideal woman as someone who appears on TV's "Baywatch." Or for girls who might hear a blissfully romantic song on the radio and sigh, "That'll happen to me someday soon."

Well, it's perfectly fine to have your head in the clouds — as long as you remember that true love also depends upon keeping your feet on the ground, according to teens who have been there.

This may not be easy for those who are just beginning to explore dating and relationships, they say. When strong feelings kick in, it's a real challenge to act with your head and not just your heart.

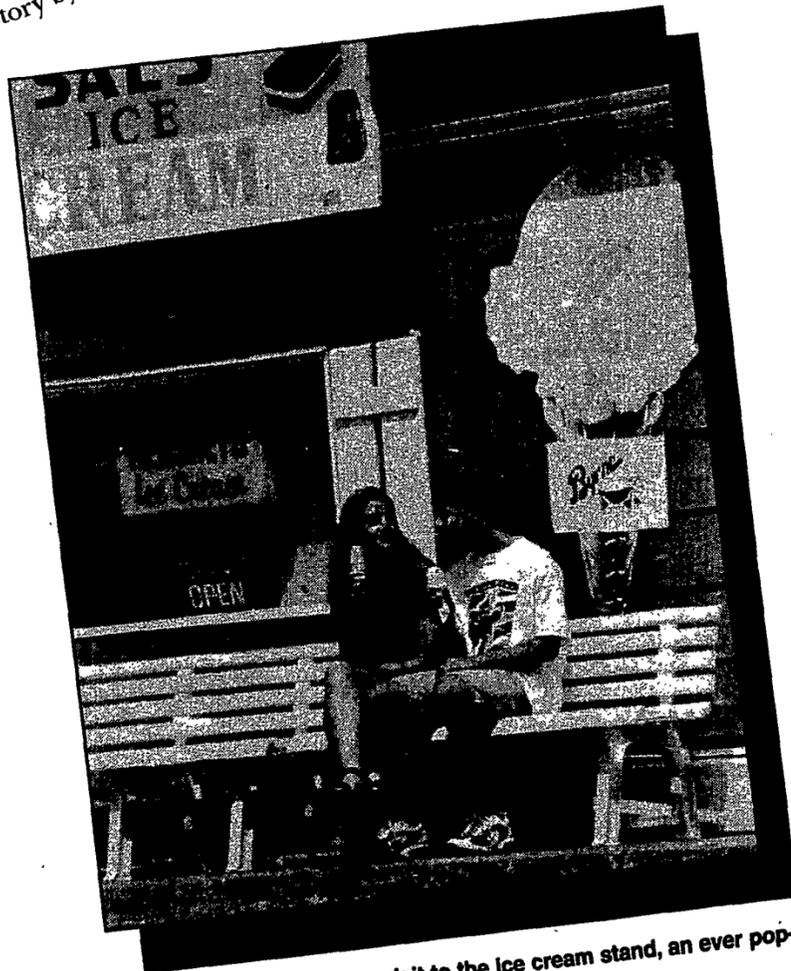
However, facing reality is a big factor in shaping a better love life, said Andrea Record, youth minister at St. Dominic's Church in Shortsville.

"As a parent, it's something I talk a lot about," Record said. "One of the things I stress is honest communication. It's crucial to all relationships, so that a sense of trust develops."

One couple with good communication skills are Record's daughter, Nicole, and her boyfriend, Michael Pickering. Nicole, 16, and Michael, 15, have been going steady for about a year.

"The most important thing is that we've got to talk about our problems, and talk to each other all the time," Michael said. "That was the thing we talked about in the very beginning (of our relationship)."

Nicole added that she had dated Michael briefly in the eighth grade, but



Greg and Katie enjoy a visit to the ice cream stand, an ever popular destination for dating.

neither was ready for a relationship at that time.

"We're a lot closer friends now than we were. Then, (dating) was just to say you were going out with somebody," Nicole remarked.

Michael, also, realizes that you must go beneath the surface to create a good relationship.

"You don't just go out and see a hot-looking girl and say, 'I want her to be my girlfriend,'" Michael pointed out.

Greg said that he has dated other girls in the past, but the comfort level he felt with Katie was what attracted him toward her.

"It's definitely the personality. She's just easy to talk to," Greg remarked.

Jessica David said that that in order to discover those inner qualities, however, she must first be drawn to potential boyfriends on a physical level.

"I'm not going to lie. They have to be attractive — and intelligent," said Jessica, 14.

Yet she also believes that if the attachment doesn't continue to deepen, the relationship won't last.

"Looks are what attract you.

Personality is what holds you," said Jessica, a Catholic from Irondequoit who is not currently affiliated with a parish.

Though Michael, Nicole, Greg and Katie are all involved in steady relationships, many of their peers have not yet acquired the same amount of dating experience. But as far as Jessica is concerned, there's no need to be in a hurry.

"A lot of my friends say, 'I have to have a boyfriend.' (But) it's more fun to date around, as long as you have fun and don't hurt anybody's feelings," Jessica said.

"At this age, the most important thing is to have fun," added Laura Allen, 16, from Holy Name of Jesus Church in Greece. "To be tied down to one person — that's for when you're married."

Andrea Record agreed that an individual's readiness for serious dating may not even occur until well after high school.

"Your own mental and emotional health has to come first before you give yourself to somebody else," she said. "This is important for teens, because they're still trying to figure out who they are as individuals."

Laura views dating as something that occurs in progressive levels.

"You can just be talking. Then you

can be seeing each other. And then you get to the full going out, boyfriend and girlfriend," she said.

Greg said that unspoken gestures, such as the "holding hands kind-of-thing," signify a deeper relationship. He added that he's not in favor of young people going steady in junior high school, "but once you get to the middle of high school it's okay to get a little serious."

Michael is proud of his relationship with Nicole, although he admits that some of his friends have trouble dealing with the situation.

"I sense a lot of jealousy. Before I had Nicole, I did a lot of things with my friends. But now some of them back away," he said.

Michael added that his relationship with Nicole has deeply affected his spiritual life. He said that he had stopped attending church regularly, but has not missed a Sunday Mass since he began dating Nicole. The couple often attends the 10:30 a.m. Mass at St. Dominic's together.

At first, Michael said, he accompanied Nicole to Mass to please her. Now, he remarked, "I'm doing it for myself."

Though Michael and Nicole are both Catholic, Greg pointed out that having the same religion isn't a requirement for having a successful relationship.

"It doesn't really matter," he said. What's more important, he added, is that he and Katie — who is not Catholic — are able to dialogue freely about religion and other sensitive topics.

Laura also believes that a couple of different faiths can succeed in a relationship.

"As long as you can talk about it, and find out what each other's views are. That's what a relationship is supposed to be, anyway," Laura commented.

"It really wouldn't matter to me," Jessica added. "Race and religion, in my mind, don't determine love."



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