

Nerds need lovin' too  
Geeky guys and gals play romantic games

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By Mark Byrne  
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[Andrew Nelles](#) / The Chronicle

Bathsheba Birman and Julia Borcherts are the creators of Nerds at Heart, a singles group that meets at Guthrie's Tavern, 1300 W. Addison Ave.

Bathsheba Birman tried speed dating once—it wasn't her cup of tea. So she, along with her friend Julia Borcherts, decided to start a dating event that would cater more to their "nerdy" interests.

The product was Nerds at Heart, a three-month-old singles group that meets once a month at Guthrie's Tavern, 1300 W. Addison St. Each events feature board games—a staple of the Wrigleyville bar—drinks, trivia focused on stereotypically nerdy topics, and most importantly, a place for self-professed nerds to mingle.

"I felt like there should be a venue for [nerds] that wasn't so clubby, where they could be themselves and be around likeminded people," said Birman, adding that she and Borcherts were no strangers to the stereotype. "We're pretty nerdy. We're both writers."

Birman isn't necessarily opposed to other dating services; she said they just aren't for her, and that they "fill a niche for a different market."

When she and Borcherts started Nerds at Heart, their intention was to get nerds to do things they might normally do, like play board games, but in an environment where they can meet new people. They also wanted to create a singles meeting that was not as pressured as the other dating services they'd tried.

"Because people are playing a game, the focus is not on interviewing someone or being interviewed," said Borcherts, also a writer and a professor in Columbia's Fiction Writing Department. "It's a little bit more relaxed."

In order to publicize the events, they trusted their nerd instincts to discern the right places to put up fliers.

“I was trying to figure out how to market it, and if I were to flier, where would I flier?” Birman said. “My sister [suggested], ‘Oh, just go everywhere you go.’”

Despite what one might expect by the name, Nerds at Heart meetings aren’t casting calls for a Revenge of the Nerds sequel. Rather, as Borcherts said, the attendees are more of “inner geeks.”

“Its more nerds at heart than people who are seriously socially challenged,” Borcherts said. “We’ve never actually had someone show up with adhesive tape on their glasses.”

Mark Fellows, who bartends and manages at Guthrie’s Tavern, has worked during the Nerds at Heart meetings, and has nothing negative to say about them.

According to Fellows, his bar sees a number of singles groups, which he thinks is a product of the laid-back atmosphere that it offers. Where sports bars or dance clubs might be too loud and busy for a couple to relax and talk, Guthrie’s is perfect for that, and with the board games, it lends itself perfectly to the needs of Nerds at Heart. Fellows claims that they are among the better singles groups that come through the bar.

“It’s just a good cross-section of people,” Fellows said. “Even though they call themselves nerds, if you were to look at them as a group and try to stereotype, you really couldn’t.”

The estimated 30 people that come to each meeting are pretty evenly split between men and women, which surprised both the founders and attendees.

“It’s funny because each gender has the impression that it’s going to be heavily weighted on their side,” Borcherts said. “The guys, I think, are most surprised to see an even sampling. They were positive that there were no nerd girls out there.”

Billi Duvalier is proof that there are. The 36-year-old global underwriter qualifies herself as a nerd because she “graduated from high school three weeks shy of [her] 17th birthday.”

“I’ve done a little online dating, but usually it’s through word of mouth,” Duvalier said. “People always seem to have an ulterior motive with [online dating]. At least with this, everybody there already has a love of board games.”

Duvalier claims she is a board game nerd and Taboo is her current favorite. However, when asked what kind of nerd she most identifies with—a part of each event—she goes with something else.

“I’m a book nerd,” Duvalier said. “When I die, the epitaph on my stone will say ‘she was wellread.’”

Frank Christ, however, only needs to say his profession to prove his nerdiness: He designs video games for cell phones. Christ, who is also seeking a masters degree in creative writing at Columbia, knows Birman and Borcherts personally and has attended all three events so far. While he has made friends and enjoys the meetings, he hasn't yet found a romantic interest.

"I've met some people, but I haven't met anyone," Christ said.

While the creators have noticed phone numbers being passed around—Duvalier claims she has one potential in mind—the general consensus is that the nerd nights are more of a fun way to meet other people they can relate to.

"If nothing else, it's a good time to go out and have a good evening," Duvalier said.

Birman said that the project has been a hit so far, and they are looking for ways to expand. Though they all love Guthrie's Tavern and think it is a great fit, they are considering switching things up with different venues. A queer version of Nerds at Heart is also in the works.

Regardless of any hookups that can be directly linked to Nerds at Heart, the program is successful in the way it brings together a large group of people who may have different interests, yet—at least according to Birman—all get along fairly well.

"Interestingly, a lot of the time we see guys just sitting around talking, because they have a lot in common," Birman pointed out.

Because of that, the direction is unsure. Given the ease of amity among participants, Birman did not seem opposed to eventually making the focus more on friendship.

"Maybe at one point we'll just have a big nerd party," Birman said.

Nerds at Heart meets next at Guthries Tavern, 1300 W. Addison St, at 7p.m. Admission, which includes one free drink, is \$15 in advance, or \$20 at the door.

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