

Caught in nostalgia's net

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By Karen Heinrich

Last year, Anna Kurz consulted a psychic to find out what life held in store for her and was told that within a year, a "passionate and sincere man" from her past would re-emerge - a soul mate who would change the course of her life.

Two months ago, the Sunshine Coast-based single mother-of-three registered with a school reunion website, www.schoolfriends.com.au, and spied a familiar name: Rohan Mayer. The last time she'd seen that name was almost 20 years ago, in 1983, when she was in her last year of school at Toorak College and dating Mayer's mate Jonathon, who was at Wesley Grammar.

Kurz e-mailed Mayer. He e-mailed her straight back. They discovered similarities: both worked in IT and were recently divorced, and now they are in love. They are planning to unite their families (Kurz, 36, has three children, and Mayer, 35, has two) by moving in together. It's a familiar story.

In the past two years, more than half-a-million Australians have been using such specially designed websites to link up again with Brett the class bully or Derek the nerd. And it's not just the generation X-ers who are rallying to the cause: Les, a relatively new subscriber, recently caught up with friends he has not seen since 1947.

For some people, memories of long-gone school days are something best left in dusty yearbooks that are signed by erstwhile friends and foes on the last day of school and then dumped in a parent's garage.

But for a growing number of people, school days are a source of delicious and voyeuristic reminiscence. Perhaps it's the satisfaction from learning that being high on the the "cool"-ladder is no indicator of success in later life. Maybe it has more to do with being able to learn that the class physics whiz never did win a Nobel Prize.

Whatever the motivation, Australia's [schoolfriends.com.au](http://www.schoolfriends.com.au) has tapped into a trend that began in the United States and Britain, where [friendsreunited.co.uk](http://www.friendsreunited.co.uk) was an Internet start-up that services Britain with its first retroactive yearbook-cum-scholastic Yellow Pages, according to *The Face* magazine.

In the past year, several people have married after making contact on Britain's Friends Reunited. One man has even been reunited with his cat, Mr Paws, kidnapped 13 years ago by a friend.

"No one expected it to become the runaway success of viral non-marketing that it's become, but since it went live in July, 2000, three-million people have logged on and crafted carefully balanced resumes of their post-school life, amping achievements and playing down shortcomings," reported *The Face*, which points out that "these websites tap into an appetite for short-term nostalgia when the future has never seemed less secure".

Vicki Dawson, one of the three founders and directors of schoolfriends.com.au, which went live in October, 2000, says that more than half-a-million Australians have registered, the oldest of whom is 91.

"We came up with the idea after seeing there were plenty of sites overseas but none that catered for Australia," Dawson says. "Everyone has gone to school and you always wonder what happened to so-and-so. It's an emotional thing."

Ross Bradley, 31, of Hoppers Crossing, was reunited with his first love, Juliette Meade, through the site. The pair met as teenagers at a RAAF school in Penang, Malaysia, where their fathers had been posted, but lost touch in 1985, when Bradley's family was headed to Townsville and Meade's to Melbourne. Bradley always wondered what became of her.

"Then I was surfing the Net, I came across the website for our old school in Penang, and saw a link to schoolfriends.com.au," says Bradley. "I registered, and about three days later I got an e-mail from Juliette saying 'Ha ha! Found you!'."

Bradley is now married with two kids and Meade is living with her boyfriend, but the pair keep in touch. "It's been a real buzz to get back in contact with her and some of our other friends from the RAAF school in Penang," he says. ""

The website has become a quick and easy way to organise -- school reunions, which in the days pre-Internet were a logistical nightmare in terms of finding new addresses for people who haven't lived with their parents for decades.

"If it wasn't for the Internet there's no way in the world that I would have caught up again with Juliette. It makes it that easy," says Bradley. ""

Kurz and Mayer agree. For two weeks, they e-mailed each other notes, photographs and text-messages before Mayer, of East Brighton, jumped on a plane and spent a long weekend with Kurz in Queensland. Mayer believes he's found his soul mate and says Kurz "was - and still is - a bit of a goddess".

"In lots of ways it feels as if time has stood still," enthuses Kurz. "Although I am sure that if we got together 18 years ago we would not be together today. We needed to take the paths that we took to become the people that we are now. We had to find ourselves before it was time to find each other again."

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