

Researcher-matchmakers mix biochemistry with social chemistry

It's hard to decide if they're more unlikely as researchers, matchmakers, or TV personalities, but Dr. Nancy Beck and Bridget Decker are all three. In the lab, Beck, a postdoctoral fellow in microbiology, and Decker, a graduate student in biochemistry, work "mostly with men, who complain that they can't find anyone to date in the Upper Valley." And they also happen to have a friend who works at Hanover's public-access television station. So the pair, who were looking for something to do with their creative energies, put one and one together and came up with a TV show for singles.

Joke: It's not quite like any show you've ever seen. Beck—who is dark and glamorously made-up—and Decker—who has a goofy laugh and a more than passing resemblance to actress Drew Barrymore—sit on a brown velvet couch in a vintage clothing store and giggle at their own and each other's jokes as their interviewees, mostly men, answer questions about themselves.

The production values remain solidly in the cable-access realm, though there's some mildly adventurous camera work and viewers occasionally get to see the studio audience, which includes people standing on chairs, beers in hand, to get a better view.

The show's name, *Fresh Meet*, is a wee bit naughty, like Beck and Decker. They're the two

women who, if you knew them, you'd never have a dinner party and not invite, because they're lively and funny and unselfconsciously interested in other people. "We're the most popular show on the station," Decker says, and then asks not to be quoted, "because we don't want to make Roz, the Humane Society lady, feel bad. She used to be the most popular show. And we want her to come on *our* show."

Beck says their secret is that "we don't ask the cheesy questions. We focus on the interviewees themselves, not what they're looking for in a date. It makes people feel pretty comfortable, and their personalities come out through their body language and their interactions with us." It may also help that the hosts themselves are not in the dating market—Beck is married and Decker has a significant other.

They both work in labs that study yeast but point out that Decker's work, in Dr. William Wickner's biochemistry lab, is with "friendly bread yeast," while Beck's, in Dr. Deborah Hogan's microbiology lab, is with "pathologically nasty yeast."

Mate: "What we study has nothing to do with dating," Decker says. "Except occasionally," Beck adds, "you do get the yeast to mate." Which may be even harder than encouraging Upper Valley residents to do the same. M.M.

Hospital president James Varnum plans to retire in 2006

James Varnum, the president of Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital for the past 27 years, has announced that he will retire in April 2006.

His has been a career marked by both constancy and change. He has been the president of MHH since 1978 and of the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Alliance (DHA) since 1983. Yet stasis in his title has not meant stasis in the organizations he's headed. With the leaders of Dartmouth Medical School and the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Clinic, he has played a major role in bringing DHMC to national prominence.

"Jim Varnum is an exceptional leader who is respected not only in the Upper Valley but also nationally," said Alfred Griggs, chair of the MHH and DHMC Boards, in an announcement of the retirement. "Jim has managed a very large, complex organization in an ever-changing environment by keeping foremost in his mind the importance of people. The result is that loyalty to Jim goes down the organizational structure as well as up."

Consortium: Among Varnum's achievements have been guiding the hospital through its 1991 move from Hanover to Lebanon, overseeing a subsequent \$224-million expansion of the Lebanon campus, and establishing the DHA—now a consortium of 11 hospitals and organizations in New Hampshire, Vermont, and Massachusetts. His commitment

CHRIS MILLIMAN



Bridget Decker (left) and Nancy Beck spend days in the lab and occasional nights as matchmakers on a cable TV show.