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Shared interests, values and devotion are the means to sustaining a lifelong friendship

By ANDREA BOYARSKY

Heather Ascher and Melissa Kudrowitz Cohen still remember their first conversation. Five years old at the time, they sat down next to each other at dancing school and introduced themselves.

The rest, as they say, is history: 22 years of history for the two women who once built villages out of toys in their Great Kills homes and enjoyed playing with their Easy-Bake Oven.

The duo, who characterize their relationship as similar to sisters, consider themselves lucky, knowing not everyone still speaks to their childhood best friend.

“I feel like it’s something special,” said Ms. Ascher. “I have other friends who get me, but she’s been there through every stage of my life. I don’t have to explain things to her.”

As **Dr. Miles Groth**, a psychology professor at Wagner College, explains it, friendships started in elementary school or earlier usually are based on convenience — i.e., being in the same class. These friendships tend to fade as children age, mature and go on to develop their own interests.

As friends continue to grow older, their lives increasingly change. One may get married, while the other moves away. Or perhaps one goes on to college and the other goes straight to work.

“A lot of early friendships just die their own death,” **Dr. Groth** observed. “As people change, it might be more difficult to sustain a relationship, though some tend to retain their strength. You need to have these continuing similar interests,” he said.

Ms. Ascher and Mrs. Cohen credit their friendship in part to their shared interests — or at least a willingness to try what the other likes. Growing up they did dance, gymnastics and softball together. In high school, they participated in the same clubs.

They were separated in college, but by distance only. As both went on to enter the teaching profession, it’s been easy for the 27-year-olds to continue to relate to each other.

The friends insist that maintaining their relationship hasn’t been difficult. In fact, even though Mrs. Cohen is now married and living in Manhattan, each tries to include the other as much as possible.

“Other people have come in and out of our lives, but we made the effort,” Mrs. Cohen said. “I’ve noticed with some other people that if they don’t put in the effort, if the other person isn’t reciprocating, it’s not going to work.”

FINDING THEIR NICHE

Friendships formed during the adolescent years and up usually have more staying power, experts say. During this time, tweens and teens tend to find their niche among others who value the same things. Also, by this age, they understand what being a good friend entails.

Dr. Michael Thompson, a psychologist based in Arlington, Mass., said he’s spoken at school assemblies and asked fourth- to ninth-graders to define “friendship.”

Answers have included: someone who cares about you; has got your back; is honest with you; doesn't care if you do dumb things, and doesn't care about the way you look.

Such descriptions also define adult friendships.

"It's the same throughout our lives, what makes a friendship," said Dr. Thompson, author of "Best Friends/Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children," (Ballantine Books).

"What you have to sustain in order to maintain a friendship is obviously positive feelings, the ability to share and the willingness to take turns," he said.

Dr. Thompson points out there is a difference in the way boys and girls form friendships. Boys develop them in larger groups and they usually revolve around activities. Girls tend to relate in smaller groups with relationships based on conversation. They also are more likely to hold onto their friends.

The psychologist said it's important not to romanticize the idea of "best friends forever." For many, it doesn't turn out that way, he said: The average child has about five close friends, while some have only one and others travel in a pack.

Patrick McCarthy and Tom Dowd Sr. met around age 13 while traveling in a pack of guys from their West Brighton neighborhood.

The two recall playing basketball at the P.S. 45 playground, going to the tennis courts at Silver Lake Park, attending co-ed dances at St. Peter's High School and going to the Jersey Shore during the earlier days of their friendship.

More than 45 years later, the two 61-year-olds continue to have shared interests and can be seen together cheering on the Jets or going out to eat.

Both place a high importance on family. Their wives have become friends and they've rooted on each other's kids in academics and extra-curricular activities.

"There was always a good chemistry between me and him," Dowd said, pointing out both men come from large families with similar values.

Although McCarthy says he still hears from other childhood friends, it's his bond with Dowd that has remained the strongest. The fact they continue to live within walking distance of each other may also have helped them maintain the friendship.

But, it's much more than that, they say.

Through the decades, they've been there for each other through good and bad, whether celebrating the birth of a child or mourning the death of a parent.

"Anyone can say you're a friend, but it needs to be a 50-50 relationship," McCarthy said, adding that's what he has with Dowd.

"No matter what, if I called him about anything, he'd be there for me and vice versa," he said. "That's what seals a good friendship."