

For better, worse, and far apart

*For some career-minded Chicagoans,
commuter marriages seem
to be working out just fine*

By SARA MICHAEL
Medill News Service

Barbara Slouffman's marriage to her husband started out traditionally enough. She and Alex Fisher met in a freshman dorm at Northwestern University and were married a few years later, vowing to spend their lives together.

Then, after the honeymoon in Quebec, the couple moved apart—Fisher to Boston to attend Harvard and Slouffman to Philadelphia to pursue a degree at University of Pennsylvania. This has been the story of their marriage.

Half of their 14 years together, nine of them as a married couple, have been spent living in different cities.

"I don't think it ever occurred to me that I would have a traditional lifestyle," said Slouffman, taking a break from finals at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management, where she is now pursuing a master's degree.

Slouffman and her husband, now living in Vancouver, British Columbia, lead a complicated and often exhausting version of a commuter marriage, where spouses set up camp in two dif-

ferent cities—in their case bouncing around to various cities but rarely together.

Their cross-country union is part of a growing trend, said Evanston-based marriage and family therapist Mary Butler. With a tight job market and increased focus on career advancement, many men and women are opting to move apart while staying committed to the union. The choice is more common among business people and professionals in a higher income bracket, Butler said, and in Slouffman's case, ambitious students.

Marriage can be tough enough without the added emotional and financial stresses of the long distance. Besides frequent traveling and establishing two homes, the fabled married life of two children and a home with a two-car garage often has to take a back seat.

"It's getting to the point where it's not old hat," said Slouffman, 31. "The older I get, the less possible it is for me to deal with. If I want to start a family, I can't."

Butler said commuter marriage couples often deal with the same issues as those who live together, but that those problems



Photo by Sara Michael

Barbara Schneidman and her husband have had a Chicago-Seattle commuter marriage for 11 years running now.

can become magnified. Concerns about security, commitment and trust can surface, making the relationship difficult to sustain. "The connection changes,"

Butler said. "The issues become about how to maintain the connection."

Slouffman's independence has
See COMMUTE on Page 14

COMMUTE

Continued from page 12

made the distance easier to bear, she said. She grew up in a military family where moving around was common, allowing her to feel comfortable without a home base and to crave the autonomy. Even during their last few years living together—most recently in Vancouver before she moved to Chicago—Slouffman was anxious to live on her own again.

"It's harder to lose yourself in a relationship when you have your own space," she said. "I think it's a benefit to our relationship, because I think I would be frustrated if I didn't have that."

Barbara Schneiderman shares Slouffman's sense of independence. Schneiderman, a 60-year-old vice president at the American Medical Association in downtown Chicago, has lived apart from her husband for more than 11 of their 19 years of marriage.

"That's probably why we're still happily married," she joked, perched in her corner office on State Street. "I don't get weird about how he's stacking the dishes in the dishwasher, because who cares? Those things aren't important."

Schneiderman and her husband, Bill McAllister, 76, bridge the divide with frequent visits between Chicago and their home in Seattle, business trips across the country, and annual vacations to Europe. The two see each other about three weekends out of the month and often a week or two at a stretch, a pattern made possible by McAllister being a semiretired real estate developer.

"I've spent more time at O'Hare [Airport], probably 300 times now," McAllister said on the phone from Seattle. "I fly United most of the time, and I have gotten to know the pilots and flight attendants."

The commuting began when Schneiderman, a psychiatrist, took a job at the American Board of Medical Specialties in Evanston, seeking more of an administrative role not offered in Seattle. She spent five years at the job, living in a town house with her 15-year-old West Highland white terrier.

"When I first decided to do



Photo by Sara Michael

Lisa Slouffman attends graduate school at Northwestern while her husband lives and works in Vancouver, British Columbia.

this, I thought I'd made a terrible mistake," she said, remembering her first day in Evanston. It was April, it was snowing, and she was stuck navigating the slick streets in her sports car.

It wasn't until she took the job at the AMA that Schneiderman really settled into the commuting lifestyle, soaking in an exciting city, a new downtown apartment, and a job that brought her four promotions in six years. What she thought would be a couple of years turned into a second job and a decade of long distance.

One downfall to the distance, McAllister said, is a lack of family cohesion.

This is the second marriage for the couple, and he has two grown children from his first marriage, who both live near him in the Pacific Northwest.

"If they had been younger, who knows, it could have been worse," McAllister said. "When we do get together, there's a

kind of—not standoffishness, but there isn't that same feeling of family."

Schneiderman just signed a two-year lease on her apartment and is thriving at work under a new senior vice president. In a couple of years, she will reexamine the situation and consider retiring and moving back.

Unlike Schneiderman, Cindy Jurie's time living long distance began with a definite deadline.

She moved to Chicago from central Florida in August to earn her Ph.D. at Erikson Institute. She plans to complete her dissertation at home near Orlando, cutting down on the time away. Also, unlike Schneiderman, Jurie views her one-bedroom apartment near in the River North neighborhood as simply a place she is staying, while her home is with her husband, dog and two cats.

"There is a part of me that wants to be settled here, but there is a part of me that feels

emotionally not permanent," said Jurie, 46, who has been married 15 years. "I don't know if I'd want to do this for a long time."

The distance does allow Jurie to focus on her studies of child development, and may even benefit the relationship, despite what some of her friends and family might think.

"We had folks who were wanting to know if we were splitting up and this was a way to do it," Jurie said.

Similarly, Slouffman's grandparents think she's "a nut case," she said, and don't understand why she has to pursue her career separate from her husband.

But for her and her husband, the distance is worth it—at least for now. "I can't imagine it any other way," Slouffman said. "The trade-offs I'd have to make in my career—I wouldn't want to do it."

"Five years from now," she continued, "I hope we're living together and starting a family. We have defined that as a goal."