

# Aging LI population signals trouble for wedding biz

Fewer young people, fewer ceremonies, fewer reasons to let everyone eat cake

By KRISTEN D'ANDREA

Industry experts are worrying that the declining number of young people choosing to live on Long Island could spell trouble for companies that specialize in the area's traditionally hot bridal market.

In 2008, 15,996 couples filed marriage licenses in one of the 15 towns across Long Island, according to Stuart Freeman, publisher of Long Island Bride and Groom magazine, which has been compiling data and tracking marriage license activity on Long Island for the last 20 years.

The 2008 numbers reflect a 15 percent decline from the 18,888 weddings on Long Island in 2000. Looking back even further, in 1990 there were 24,272 weddings on the Island, Freeman said.

The trend parallels Long Island's loss from 2000 to 2008 of 5.3 percent, or 145,630, of residents between the ages of 25 and 44, said Pearl Kamer, chief economist of the Long Island Association, the region's largest business group.

On Long Island, three out of four brides and grooms are between 23 and 30 years old, according to Freeman.

Following New York City, Long Island is the second priciest place in the country to get married, according to Claudia Copquin, founder and editor of GettingMarriedOn-LongIsland.com. The average cost of a wedding on Long Island is between \$35,000 and \$40,000, Freeman said.

If the number of weddings on Long Island continues to decline as it has over the past two decades, it could mean a big hit for the area's roughly \$600 million wedding industry.

Michael Maurantonio, general manager of the Fox Hollow, restaurant, hotel and catering hall in Woodbury, and CIO of Scotto Brothers, said he has noticed a steady decline in the number of wedding receptions during the last three years.

"We do have a few less brides, no question," he said.

He said he anticipated a drop-off in weddings after the 2000 U.S. Census indicated there would be fewer brides of marrying age on Long Is-

land until the next wave of young people reached their mid-20s. Coupled with the strong Sweet 16 market the Fox Hollow has seen in the last five years, Maurantonio anticipates there will be another increase in the wedding market within the next seven to 10 years.

Still, he said, "the advent of college students moving off of Long Island is certainly a concern."

Long Island's wedding industry has been hit with "a double whammy — brain drain coupled with a struggling economy," Freeman said.

"It's been challenging. Not only do we have fewer brides but we also have people who are not looking to spend money like they used to."

Freeman said he is optimistic, however, that the decline in weddings will soon turn around.

"If real estate prices continue to come down, as they have recently, more brides will be able to afford a home here and stay on Long Island," he said.

Even among young adults who flee the Island, many choose to return to their hometowns when it's time to get married.

"I've noticed an increase in the number of queries I get from brides who were raised here and are now living out-of-town, but planning their weddings here," Copquin said.

Local caterers and wedding vendors agreed. "We are also seeing that the tradition of being married where the bride grew up is holding, but the daughter lives outside of Long Island and the mother is the primary scout for locations and services," said Peter Lessing, division manager of Lessing's Hospitality, who leads the firm's Three Village Inn in Stony Brook.

"When Mom narrows the search, the bride-to-be will return home and make the final decision."

Gina Merigliano, owner of Bridal Suite of Bay Shore, has noticed a similar trend. "People, especially brides, are rooted where their parents are. Even if they move away, they tend to come back to Long Island to get married."

Even those who do not have a direct link to Long Island are choosing to get married here, she said, citing the buzz created when celebrities such as singer Kevin Jonas got married at Huntington's Oheka Castle in December, and rumors that New York Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter also plans to tie the knot on Long Island this year.

"That's going to give Long Island a name," Merigliano said.

