Living the Abstinent Lifestyle in New York

Trinity Laurel moved to Manhattan at 21 to pursue a modeling career. Raised in a Christian home, Laurel was a virgin when she reached the city, and says she has “remained pure” while living here since.

Not all of her friends can relate.

“They’re like, ‘How do you do that?’ ” Laurel, now 28, said. “People are almost fascinated.”

Welcome to New York, [Tim Tebow](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/t/tim_tebow/index.html?inline=nyt-per). Now that [the Jets](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/sports/profootball/nationalfootballleague/newyorkjets/index.html?inline=nyt-org) have broken training camp and Tebow, a famous chaste Christian, becomes a full-time New Yorker, it has become a common, and mildly amusing, pastime to fret about the temptations he might face or the potential loneliness he might suffer.

But Laurel’s story, and the stories of other abstinent singles in New York, suggest that he will have plenty of company, and prospective dates. Indeed, Tebow may be better positioned for a chaste life than other New Yorkers, simply because he did not spend his early 20s in the city.

“Twenty-four is a really tough age,” Laurel said. “You’ve been out of college a couple of years. You’ve had some fun.” That’s when a sense of isolation can set in, she said, and erode one’s devotion to chastity.

A representative for Tebow, who recently turned 25, said Tebow was not available for comment.

Other current and former abstinent New Yorkers said age was less a factor than other elements.

“If you make it to New York and you’re a virgin, you’ve still got a high percentage chance of maintaining the V-card,” said Conor Dwyer, 29, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who married in June after meeting his future wife in Manhattan. “But if you’re on the fence, it’d be really hard.”

One challenge, Dwyer and others said, is that abstinent singles can struggle to find close friends who empathize with their situation.

“When my friends found out I was planning on waiting until I was married, I got laughed at quite a bit,” said Miki Reaume, a Christian and former Rockette at Radio City Music Hall who lived in New York for nine years before marrying in 2010.

When she dated non-Christians, Reaume said, the topic would usually arise on the third date.

“And then the relationship ended,” she said.

Not surprisingly, there are no entirely reliable statistics on the number of abstinent New Yorkers, and researchers and religious leaders interviewed for this article declined to offer estimates. Nationally, though, premarital abstinence is not common. A study released in 2006 by the Guttmacher Institute, which is based in Manhattan, said that by age 30, 93 percent of respondents had had premarital sex.

Based on New York’s reputation, one might expect to find even fewer abstinent singles here. Then again, the city is long removed from its Sodom-on-the-Hudson heyday, before former Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani’s quality-of-life initiative relegated sex shops, X-rated cinemas and their patrons to the city’s hinterlands.

That shift coincided with the rise of evangelical Christian ministries like Redeemer Presbyterian Church and Hillsong Church NYC, among others, whose vast congregations draw from the full range of New York’s demographics.

Still, the city is a far cry from Provo, Utah.

The Rev. Michael Keller, who grew up in Manhattan and who leads the Reformed University Fellowship City Campus ministry at Redeemer, said New York’s commodified approach to sex makes life more difficult for the abstinent. “If everyone else is using sex as something to consume, you will too,” he said.

The spread of college-based abstinence groups like the Anscombe Society may help newcomers feel more comfortable about their chastity, said Donna Freitas, a Brooklyn resident and author of “Sex and the Soul,” a survey of sexual behavior among college students. “There’s more conversation going on about what’s happening in the hookup culture, and how much unease there is about it,” she said.

“But the 20-somethings who’ve chosen abstinence are obviously going against the norm here, so it can be hard to find community,” she added.

While online chat rooms offer support and virtual fellowship, abstinent singles said local faith-based institutions — especially more conservative ones like Redeemer and Hillsong — were more helpful, at least as a first step.

Reaume said her affiliation with Redeemer helped relatively little until she joined a small Bible study group in her Astoria neighborhood. “Until that point, I had a lot of friends, but not a lot who shared the same faith and lived it out the same way,” she said.

Laurel was more strategic about seeking companionship early on. Before leaving for a college internship, she phoned [Models for Christ](http://www.modelsforchrist.com/), which serves members of the fashion industry, and a representative met her at Pennsylvania Station.

Models for Christ events helped Laurel find a group of abstinent friends. “In Christian circles here in the city, it’s kind of an elephant in the room,” she said. “It’s hard for a lot of Christians to make that jump between meeting someone and getting married.”

Laurel said almost all of her married girlfriends were courted by men from outside the city whom they met online or through friends. “The guys will come visit and then they’ll move away as a couple,” she said. “A lot of girls joke that you have to import the good guys.”

After nearly nine years in New York, Reaume logged on to [ChristianMingle.com](http://ChristianMingle.com/), a dating site. Her messages to a few local men went ignored, but Tré Reaume, a youth pastor in San Diego, reached out. The Reaumes now live in Painted Post, N.Y.

New York’s Mormons seem to have a slightly easier time finding dates and like-minded friends. Unmarried Mormons gather and worship in singles-only wards, which are also hubs of weeknight church activities and conduits for nonchurch gatherings.

Dwyer moved to Manhattan in 2010 without an established social circle, but within a week of joining the Lincoln Square singles ward, he was invited to two rooftop parties and a wedding. On his second Saturday in town, he met his future wife, Angela, at another party. (They moved to Connecticut after marrying.)

The vibrant party scene among young Mormons, Dwyer said, is consistent with the church’s emphasis on marriage, and on active, chaste dating as a means to that end. “We don’t really have bars where we go to hang out casually,” he said.

Dwyer’s wife agreed. “The church wants you to have the opportunity for marriage,” she said. “And in a community that practices abstinence, you’d better get married young, because it gets harder.”

Rev. Keller, of Redeemer Presbyterian, said he did not like the idea of organizing singles-based activities for abstinent members of the congregation. “It’s important,” he said. “But I also don’t want to elevate it to make it an ultimate thing.”

Laurel said that in some ways, it was easier to remain abstinent in New York City than in the suburbs. “There’s more to distract you,” she said. “I don’t sit at home thinking about what I don’t have. I have a full life.”

Among other activities, Laurel attends a weekly Bible study meeting in a Midtown cafe, where she met for an interview. After leaving the cafe and walking a short distance, she looked up at a sign for the Museum of Sex.

“I know. It’s ridiculous, isn’t it?” she said of her choice of Bible study locations. “I choose not to focus my attention on it.”