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For students, lessons in long-distance love and heartbreak

By COURTNEY McCANN, Staff Writer, 609-272-7219 | Posted: Saturday, September 12, 2009 |

Before Nicole Chamra left her Carteret, Middlesex County, home to start her freshman year at Richard Stockton College in Galloway Township, she had to sit her boyfriend of five years down for "the talk."

You know, the talk every high-school couple has when they realize they will be living apart for a majority of the next four years.

"It was hard," Chamra said. "We just decided to work on it and keep communicating."

One of the biggest hurdles for college freshmen to overcome is dealing with a long-distance relationship and figuring out whether it's best to keep high-school love alive or focus on meeting new people.

"Even with adults, long-distance relationships require such an extraordinary amount of trust and constantly checking in, and feeling like you can maintain strong ties even though you're living separate lives," says Lisa Paz, a marriage/family therapist and adjunct professor at the University of Miami.

"When you start college, you're experiencing all these new things and you're experiencing them separate from your significant other."

It's been tough for Chamra, especially when she sees her dormmates spending time with their boyfriends.

"Most of the girls at Stockton live nearby, so for them they can jump in a car and be (home) in 20 minutes," says Chamra. "I have to drive two hours."

Some couples try to compromise by enforcing a "don't ask, don't tell" rule when they are away at school. But social-networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace make it difficult to keep that rule.

"You have this voyeuristic window to see what your significant other may or may not be doing," Paz says. "People are making friends, posting pictures and status updates about who was at this party or that party."

High-school sweethearts exist, Paz says, but the reality is that making a clean break early on can prevent a lot of heartache.

Khayriy Tilghman, 17, tried to keep his relationship going when he left Newark to live full-time at Stockton. But with his girlfriend away at school in Baltimore and his own plate full with schoolwork and athletics, Tilghman decided to end the relationship shortly after starting classes.

"I didn't want to cheat," says Tilghman, adding he's enjoying meeting new people and getting to stay out late. "I didn't have enough time for her."

Chamra hopes to avoid a similar situation. She talks to her boyfriend on the phone daily and the couple tries to get together each weekend either in Carteret or at Stockton.

"We're just trying to keep the lines of communication open," Chamra says. "You have to express your feelings or you lose out on love."

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