



TWOgether prescribes education for healthy marriages

Free classes aim to keep couples connected

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By Anya Sostek, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Spicing up your marriage today with roses, lingerie or chocolate?

If Terry Mann has his way, loving exchanges also will include the gift that keeps on giving: marriage education classes. Because, in his mind, nothing says "I love you" like spending a dozen hours chatting with other couples in a church basement.

Mr. Mann runs TWOgether Pittsburgh, one of the largest federally funded "healthy marriage initiatives" in the country. Over the past three years, his group has taught more than 2,100 people in the Pittsburgh region how to improve their relationships.

We can bemoan the divorce rate. We can watch as seemingly stable, high-profile marriages hit the skids (see Madonna, John Edwards or our very own Pittsburgh Mayor Luke Ravenstahl). We can watch as less stable, non-high-profile marriages hit the skids (see the Jerry Seinfeld-produced NBC show "The Marriage Ref" that premieres March 4).

Or, says Mr. Mann, we can do something about it.

"Most of our programs are not for couples who are hanging by a thread and have the scissors out," said Mr. Mann. "If we can address healthy marriages, maybe they will not become the distressed marriages later."

The concept of giving marriages regular oil changes, rather than waiting until the engine seizes, has come about largely in the past decade, said Mr. Mann, who has been married for 35 years and previously ran a church divorce support group.

It's an idea being promoted by a small but passionate number of people in government, churches and schools who believes that relationships function best with proper instruction.

For the Rev. Dirk Lesnett, pastor of Elfinwild Presbyterian Church in Shaler, it's a message that he has been preaching for years.



Lake Fong/Post-Gazette
Fred and Gayle Carroll of Mt. Lebanon, who have been married for two years, took marriage preparation classes with TWOgether Pittsburgh.

"It's not just celebrities," he said. "Marriage is hard work. You can't take for granted that your relationship will be on automatic pilot."

Marriage -- including physical intimacy -- is a topic that comes up frequently during his sermons. If a couple want him to officiate at their wedding, he requires eight premarital counseling sessions on topics such as money, conflict resolution and intimacy.

Rev. Lesnett believes that the proper forums for marriage education are the family and the church.

Brandon McGinley, a Whitehall native who is now a senior at Princeton University, disagrees. Mr. McGinley, who recently finished a term as president of a pro-abstinence group on campus called the Anscombe Society, is asking the university to become more involved in marriage education.

"Princeton University prepares its students well for many aspects of life after college. It churns out investment bankers and analysts like an assembly line. It has an entire school dedicated to preparing young people for government service ... ," the politics major wrote in the Daily Princetonian last fall.

"And yet hardly a word is spoken, either by the University or among students, about preparing members of this generation for participation in the most important social institutions of all: marriage and family."

Donna Freitas, a Boston University professor who researches sex on college campuses, believes that while college students wouldn't necessarily be interested in instruction on marriage, many could use lessons in relationship skills.

Students often do not know how to move from a pervasive "hook-up culture" into meaningful relationships, she said, and there are plenty of opportunities for colleges to help students along. Dr. Freitas teaches classes such as Sexuality and Spirituality in American Youth Culture and has encountered questions from students such as this: How do I ask someone out, during the day, when I'm not drunk?

"There certainly need to be more courses where students can explore the nature of relationships in theoretical or practical ways," she said. "It's amusing to think about it, but it's so basic it doesn't occur to us that we need to have these conversations."

TWOgether Pittsburgh runs classes for people in all stages of relationships.

Some classes teach high school students about healthy relationships. Others, including one called How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk or Jerkette, target single adults interested in marriage. The group's most popular classes -- marriage preparation and marriage enrichment -- are for engaged, newly married and relatively happily married couples, while the class on sustaining marriage through difficulties works with couples having problems.

TWOgether Pittsburgh began as a faith-based initiative under President George W. Bush, but its \$8.35 million, five-year demonstration grant has continued into the Obama administration. Though the programs began nationally targeting low-income men and women, the Pittsburgh classes are open to everyone.

Classes are free and held in dozens of locations around the region.

Though many of the classes meet in churches, federal regulations require that the class content not promote religion, Mr. Mann said. Rather, the classes focus on common problem areas in marriages: finances, intimacy, conflict resolution and communication.

Fred Carroll is no stranger to marriage. The 74-year-old Mt. Lebanon resident was happily married for 47 years before his wife died. But shortly before he remarried in 2008, he heard about the TWOgether Pittsburgh marriage preparation class and decided to give it a try.

Even for a veteran of marriage, the class was helpful, he said.

"It's more of a preventive thing than a repair," he said. "I came as a fairly seasoned professional. What it was, was basically a way of solving conflicts before they ever happened. It was definitely worthwhile."

Although he and his current wife, Gayle, don't argue much, he said the class has helped him realize that sometimes during a disagreement they are actually each discussing a different issue.

For Jason Molnar, 28, of Green Tree, who is planning a September wedding, the marriage preparation class has changed the way that he and his fiancée communicate on some issues.

Recently, his fiancée was irritated that Mr. Molnar couldn't come to a dinner because the time of the dinner had changed and now conflicted with his work schedule. Rather than fight about the dinner over the phone at the time they realized that he couldn't come, they set a time to discuss it several days later.

"We spent a lot of time with conflict resolution -- when we get to these arguments, how do we deal with them?" he said. "One of the big things was not just having spur-of-the-moment passionate arguments but finding what the core root of the problem is."

Mr. Molnar also appreciates that the classes are held with a group of other couples.

"You realize that the problems you have are the problems that everyone has," he said.

And the class has him convinced of the value of marriage education. If TWOgether Pittsburgh is still around after Mr. Molnar has been married for a few years, he said that he would definitely try the marriage enrichment class.

"That would be the next piece for us," he said.

You can learn more about TWOgether Pittsburgh at www.twogetherpgh.org or by calling 888-WED-4EVR (933-4387).

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