



## **‘The Marriage Works’ answer for struggling couples**

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Four years and more than 200 couples later, the founding agencies of a federally funded marriage education program “The Marriage Works” came together for an elegant dinner held last month at the Pittsburgh Athletic Association to honor and celebrate the accomplishment of Shawn Pinkston as project director of the program. Close to 100 individuals, many of whom were couples who have been through the 10- week “Marriage Works” program, were on hand to take part in the celebration.

The evening was sponsored by TWOgether Pittsburgh, whose director, Terry Mann, served as the emcee for the evening.

A historical overview of the program’s beginnings was given by Karla Byrd, executive director of the Center for Urban Biblical Ministries. “The Marriage Works” was created as a result of the collective concern of its three founding agencies; Family Guidance, The National Fatherhood Initiative and CUBM.

“Their concerns were with regard to the negative state of youth in the identified neighborhoods, the incidence of youth being referred to Child Welfare Department, as well as the fact that in these communities—Homewood, Garfield, East Liberty and Lincoln-Lemington—single parent households outnumbered two-parent households by more than 4-1,” said Byrd. A series of meetings among the leadership of these participating agencies, and many conversations about what it would take to bring hope to the children and families of this region and a change in the statistics, resulted in the joint conclusion that perhaps the answer could be found in coming up with a way to strengthen the relationships their parents are in.

A coalition was formed that continued to do research necessary to plan and write a grant that would be submitted to the Administration for Children and Families under the Children’s Bureau to bring an educational program to fruition. This was done under the premise that healthy families result in healthy children. In spite of stiff competition, in the fall of 2005 the coalition was awarded a four-year grant for the creation of “The Marriage Works.” Immediately a search was on for a project

director and Pinkston jumped at the opportunity. Byrd said he was passionate, and equipped to lead this initiative and ultimately successful as all the grant goals and objectives were met.

Reverend Sharon Dennard, head of programs and education at Mt. Ararat Baptist Church, one of the program sites, remarked that “a winning marriage is a lot like a ‘winning football team’ in that one of the components in the time of marital strife is to have a great coach.” She said Shawn and Marriage Works were coaches for many of the couples.

Two couples who completed the program gave moving testimonies about their personal experience in the program, and how it made the difference in their married life. Terrance and Lillian Grate of Highland Park, married four years, said they were honored to state publically what “The Marriage Works” had done for them. Terrance Grate said, “I learned what it meant to be “one” with my wife...this program has made me a better husband, father and man. I will feed what I have learned back to the community. A second couple, Felicia and Clifford Howard of East Liberty, also married four years, shared as well. Reverend Clifford Howard said, “As a minister, I was challenged on how to be ministered to through the program. I learned to hold my wife near and dear to me and to talk to her. His wife stated, “We were living together physically, but for years were emotionally separated. Marriage Works saved our home.”

The celebration had a bittersweet tone to it because it was only a four-year grant; and the federal funding ends Oct. 31. Pinkston has been encouraged by the leadership to continue the work that has been started, to form a 501(c3) and with the support of TWOgether Pittsburgh, and the other three agencies, to keep the project alive and add a follow up session, “Marriage Enrichment 201.”

Byrd referred to this night as “the end of the beginning.” In his remarks Pinkston, along with expressing his extreme gratitude, challenged all those in attendance to become ambassadors for healthy marriages—to commit to join the fight to reduce the statistics because those who suffer the most are the children.