



Warning Signs: Class teaches people 'How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk'

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By Joanne Barron
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Laura Hughes hears the phrase, "Oh yeah," a lot in her work. Mostly it's from women taking the class, "How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk."

Hughes, of Sewickley, teaches the class and other marriage workshops at St. Stephen's Church and other sites, as part of the TWOgether Pittsburgh initiative.

About 20 women attended a recent five-session class through St. Stephen's ministry, Side by Side, which helps single mothers through a free children's boutique, a mentoring program and educational workshops.

"At least one of the women in our class broke up with her boyfriend, and a couple of the others figured out why they got divorced through the class," said Andrea Zimmerman, Side by Side founder.

Anna Novak, of Sewickley, one of the single students who is working toward getting married, said she was interested because of the "hilarious" title.

"We have all had our jerk experiences and could easily relate," she said. "But, it isn't always the man who is the jerk; women can easily be jerkettes as well. So, this was an eye-opening experience."

Students are taught to start valuing themselves as women.

"We are worth it — worth being treated well, worth waiting for the right man and not settling just because we are lonely or other reasons, such as financial ones," Novak said. "It has created new discussions in my current relationship — subjects such as financial views, personal dreams on how we see our future, goals, family background, traditions, beliefs, moral and spiritual opinions."

She and her boyfriend now have deeper conversations to see how their lives can connect and where problem areas might be, she said.

"It has given me a deeper understanding of him. He has expressed gratitude for the course, because not only am I learning more in-depth about him, but he is doing the same to me," she said.

The class also urges students to put logic into falling in love by using their hearts and not losing their heads.

"It teaches you to learn to trust at the appropriate time. You learn the process of getting to know someone first and then making a commitment to avoid a broken heart and avoid surprises after you're married," Hughes said.

John Van Epp, author of "How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk," and a clinical psychologist who trained Hughes, recommends people wait at least 90 days after meeting someone before considering a serious relationship.

Hughes, who has been married for close to 16 years and has four children, also was trained in and teaches TWOgether Pittsburgh marriage enrichment classes and a mentoring program, which pairs up those who have been married for many years with younger couples.

TWOgether Pittsburgh, with a staff of nine, started as a five-year, \$8.35 million federally-funded project in September 2006 to strengthen marriages and families in the region.

It is part of a coalition which includes Family Guidance, Inc., as the lead agency, the Center for Urban Biblical Ministry, the National Fatherhood Initiative, the Women's Center and Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh, Smith Brothers Advertising, and a team of Evaluators led by Dr. Stanley Denton.

Programs include marriage enrichment, including parenting, step-parenting and fatherhood skills development; marriage preparation; divorce reduction; couple-to-couple mentoring; high school relationship and family education; and a public awareness campaign imparting positive messages about marriage.

All are offered free, and some who teach classes are given small stipends. Since 2006, more than 5,000 people have taken the classes in Allegheny, Beaver, Butler, Washington and Westmoreland counties.

Terry Mann, project director of TWOgether Pittsburgh, located on Duff Road in Ohio Township, said discussions with legislators are taking place for an expansion of the grant.

The programs began as a reaction to the high divorce rate, which Mann said is between 35 to 50 percent around the country. Although the rate has been dropping, western Pennsylvania is lagging behind.

From a region survey, it was found that some of the major stresses on marriage in the region are the economy, traffic, having to care for elderly parents, sports and weather.

Mann, who has been married for 35 years, said a high percentage of those who take the classes have favorable remarks and changes in attitude.

"I think the best comment I got was just recently. One woman said, 'Holy crap! Where else can you get something like this for free? This is the best kept secret in Pittsburgh.'"

Contact Laura Hughes at ocmshughes@verizon.net for information about a class to be scheduled in Sewickley.

Read more: <http://www.yoursewickley.com/sewickleyherald/article/warning-signs-class-teaches-people-how-avoid-marrying-jerk>