

The Oregonian

Finding wedded bliss, minus a few blisters

Marriage is hard work, and these days more couples are getting more help with pre-wedding counseling programs

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Julie Sullivan, The Oregonian, Oct. 16, 2007

From their first date along the Clackamas River, LeAnn Seward and Doug White discovered a torrent of things to talk about.

He loved that other people came to her for comfort. That she was stable, beautiful and warm. She loved that he was so open about his past. And that he was a Christian man who wasn't a geek.

But fight? They did, and badly. Disagreements always seemed to end with her furious, him frustrated and someone stomping out. Seward resorted to filling White's voicemail just to finish what she needed to say.

How, she wondered, could they marry?

What, he wondered, do other couples do?

Well, say Tom and Liz Dressel, as they faced Seward and White in their Oregon City living room recently: "We save it until Thursday.

"We found that if we save conflict for one meeting, we can have fun the rest of the week," Liz Dressel said. They also practice a well-researched technique of taking turns talking, keeping statements brief and stopping to let the listener paraphrase.

Their coaching, over slices of Liz's lemon pie, places White and Seward amid a national marriage movement sweeping Portland, where at least 30 seminars, classes and conferences on strengthening marriage are available. Among them: "10 Great Dates," "Learning Intelligent Love," "Marriage Mentoring," "Love and Logic" and "A Lasting Promise."

Never has marriage been so optional for Oregonians -- 30 percent fewer adults are married than 30 years ago -- but never has it been so supported. After decades of treating marriage as a private matter,

government, churches and industry have joined to help those adults who choose to be married have the best shot at succeeding. The Bush administration's \$200 million Marriage Initiative poured more than \$1 million into Portland nonprofit programs to strengthen relationships. Hundreds of churches have pledged to require four months of premarital counseling. Corporate sponsors are paying for marriage research as good for worker productivity.

Even the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services touts that couples who undergo just eight hours of premarital counseling divorce at a rate 30 percent lower than others.

"If you look at what happens when people are not in a healthy relationship and children are raised in those environments, you see that it costs a lot of money, and a lot of lives are hurt and damaged," says Rose Fuller, executive director of Northwest Family Services, which offers the program "Lasting Relationships" through a federal grant.

Couples are responding. "Engaged Encounter," a premarital retreat sponsored by the Catholic Church, is registering more couples of all ages and backgrounds, many of whom have no religious training or may not even profess to believe in God.

"The trend is that people are seeking out marriage preparation, recognizing that they should take a workshop before they get married," says Nancy Fisher, an elementary school teacher who helps conduct the weekend retreats with her husband, Michael.

All this training also has turned hundreds of ordinary Oregon couples into lay mentors, experts at communicating and modeling healthy relationships. Long after

the money runs out, they remain a living web of support.

But can another couple save a marriage?

"Yes," says Liz Dressel. "Because we give hope."

By any measure, White and Seward trained for their marriage vows last Saturday like they would a marathon.

Neither had married before. Both came from divorced families. White, 42, is raising a 15-year-old son, Sheldon. But the sheet-metal mechanic had undergone years of counseling on his own to confront anger and abandonment issues that had ended other relationships. He saw premarital counseling as a means to self-confidence and security as a couple.

At 36, Seward, an assistant to a Standard Insurance executive, knew that she wanted to be as emotionally whole as possible, and scheduled individual sessions with a professional counselor.

"Honestly, we love to volunteer and want to reach out to others and if you're not healthy you can't do that," she said. "This wasn't just for Doug and me, it was for his son, the neighbors, everybody."

Both also met with their pastor to launch their marriage in the faith that introduced them. And finally, because their Oregon City Evangelical Church is one of 170 Clackamas County churches that had pledged to strengthen marriage, they enrolled in mandatory premarital education with a mentor couple.

They were assigned to the Dressels. After 42 years, the Oregon City couple has been married longer than the younger couple has been alive. Tom Dressel is a retired mechanical engineer; Liz is a semi-retired registered nurse and educator. The four knew one another from church, but the Dressels assured the younger couple of confidentiality.

During six weekly meetings in the Dressels' home, the couple talked through a 156-question inventory developed at Creighton University to raise issues they

might not have addressed on their own, including how their parents fought; how they manage money ("To have a habitual latte, it's not how I grew up," White says); and what commitment means ("It means that he is going to back me up, be on my side, even if I screw up," Seward says).

The couple was thrilled to learn they had already talked about a great many things. And they also quickly tried suggestions such as the speaker-listening technique. They laughed that their habit of trading voicemails during fights was, in fact, a version of that taking turns technique. "I'm just not sure how it's going to work when we're in the same house," Seward said.

They plan to see the Dressels four times in the coming year. Throughout their evenings together so far, Tom Dressel has reminded them that unlike Hollywood marriages, real unions ebb and flow, but that closeness returns even stronger. The older couple speaks of how their marriage was once "in shambles" until finding their faith and deciding to invest in their marriage pulled them through.

"Seeing you gives me hope," White says.

"The biggest relief is just knowing that we are not doomed," Seward says. "It doesn't have to end. People actually work through things and are OK."

Being mentors isn't easy. The Dressels attended dozens of classes to learn the communication skills developed by University of Denver researchers and other social scientists. They went to Toastmasters to improve their public speaking. They've sometimes felt humiliated by putting themselves out there (one couple complained they were a bit old to be giving advice about modern situations). And for them, a "date night" means they coordinate a "Date Night" program at their church so other married people can get out with their spouse once a month. Last month, 90 people showed. But that means, they say, they are making a difference.

On Saturday, they beamed as a radiant Seward and White stood before a crowded

church and a trio of pastors: their own Pastor Tom Hurt; her uncle, David Wildermuth; and her grandfather, Wendell Seward. The service began with a recording of bride and groom reading a love letter to one another. Then the Dressels rose, just before the vows, to offer their blessing. They told the couple they were off to a great start and to remember that the roots of a tree grow deeper in winter.

As Pastor Hurt offered his final blessing, he pointed to the mentor couple.

"Remember what Tom and Liz have shared," he said.

"Two are better than one."

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What Makes a Great Marriage?

Nancy and Michael Fisher of Beaverton have spent 15 years of their 16-year union volunteering at "Engaged Encounter." We asked them, what makes a great marriage?

Nancy: All the little things and all the big things. Trusting each other, open communication, always looking for the best in the other person. Asking, what would make your day today? How do you want to be shown love? The last huge ingredient is forgiveness.

Michael: Relationships go through a recurring cycle. There's romance, then disillusionment where you're in the valley, and then the part of the cycle that is true joy; the joy comes from accepting each other and really having made the decision to love each other. People think love is a feeling, but love is a decision, a verb, it's an action word. We didn't grasp the full meaning of that, it took experiencing those cycles.

Nancy: The more you love and work on your marriage, the smaller those valleys are and the stronger your relationship will grow. The lie is that it's all great and if it's not great, it's over.

Michael: People focus so much on the wedding day. We focus on the rest of their life.

-- *Michael Fisher, writer, public relations; and Nancy Fisher, teacher. Parents of Brandon, 12, and Sophie, 7.*

Marriage Resources

Every Marriage Matters, 503-655-1489
www.everymarriagematters.org

Catholic Engaged Encounter, 503-267-3605
www.oregonengagedencounter.org

Lasting Relationships, Northwest Family Services, 503-215-6377
www.lastingrelationships.org

Samaritan Counseling Centers,
503-281-3318
www.sccpdx.org

Marriage and Family Connections of Multnomah County, 503-312-2485
www.marriagefamily.org

Thriving Families of Clark County,
360-608-4055
www.thrivingfamilies.org

A Beautiful Marriage Education Center,
503-620-1500
www.abeautifulmarriage.com

Marriage Team, 360-450-6042
www.marriageteam.org