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Coalition aims to create healthy families, relationships

(by Kelly Moffitt - October 14, 2009)



Not many would classify the decision not to marry as a success for the St. Louis Healthy Marriage Coalition. Yet for Executive Director Bridget Brennan helping couples realize they aren't ready for matrimony is one of the greatest achievements of SLHMC.

"The best outcome I've seen with couples is that they have gotten the skills they need to get back on track," Brennan said. "The second most exciting thing for couples that aren't married is for them to realize they shouldn't [be married]. They realize they love each other but it wouldn't work out in a married lifestyle."

Brennan started out as a marriage educator for St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church. When federal money became available under healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood grants in 2005, she

started the non-profit SLHMC.

SLHMC recently moved to the Central West End as their services began expanding. The coalition now encompasses more than 12 agencies that all work to promote "stronger marriages, families, communities" including Lutheran Family and Child Services, Aish HaTorah, Fathers' Support Center of St. Louis, and the Missouri 4-H Club.

"We're a coalition so we fund other agencies who do healthy relationship work," Brennan said. "We're all over the community promoting and supporting healthy relationships for the welfare of children and community."

SLHMC serves four kinds of people: singles, cohabitating couples, married couples and single parents. "Relationship skills are for everyone," Brennan said.

Through its partners and its own staff of four, SLHMC offers classes ranging from building healthy relationship skills in high school to surviving marital fights to learning how to communicate to marriage preparation classes.

Lutheran Family and Child Services is one of the organizations in the coalition that offers classes and marital coaching and has been involved with the coalition for two and a half years. Relationship coach and counselor for LFCS, Lynn Duffield, said that there is a give and take relationship between LFCS and SLHMC.

"In addition to being able to put on classes on good relationship skills, the coalition has also helped us train a lot of our counselors to help us deliver more effective services; we have really helped a lot of people save their relationships and develop better communication skills from being able to draw on the coalition for help."

One of the more recent classes is "Bringing Baby Home," which is designed to help couples work through the relationship changes that come with having a baby. Class sizes range from 10 to 15 couples and almost all of the classes are free, with the exception of those that require a registration fee for food and supply purposes.

In addition to the classes, Duffield said one-on-one mentoring has been popular despite the trouble of motivating couples to come out and spend time that could be otherwise spent finishing more pressing daily chores.

"People get married without doing their homework," Brennan said. "Too many people are getting married at the infatuation level and when hard times come, it falls apart. We've fallen in love with the wedding industry when what we need is a marriage industry."

Though SLHMC does not provide therapy, it has created a database of licensed therapists to use as a list for referral. The searchable database allows visitors to the SLHMC website to find therapists based on their proximity to the searcher's home.

What Brennan sees as the problem creating successful marriages today is that individuals have to face the switch from the intimate lifestyle of the agrarian days to a world where "the garage door goes up, dad leaves, mom leaves, the kids leave and there is no one at home to create a family intimacy," Brennan said.

Brennan also said that getting married too quickly, getting sexually intimate too quickly, and emotional unavailability are the major downfalls of relationships today. Another big contributor to the divorce rate is that individuals believe marriage happens when you fall in love.

Likewise, before a marriage can work, the individual must have a sense of autonomy. That's why SLHMC has been concentrating a lot more recently on preventative skill-sets for singles.

According to Brennan, love is a decision made out of want for mutual security, respect, and enhancement.

Recently, Brennan has seen many couples struggling under the weight of the recession.

"A big issue for couples is overspending," Brennan said, noting that she hopes SLHMC's classes "help finances bring people together instead of tear them apart."

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A big part of SLHMC's goals is to cut back on the heavy financial weight of the divorce rate. Brennan said that lost tax revenue, welfare issues, judicial costs, Medicaid and all the costs associated with divorce and family instability amounts to a cost of \$112 billion a year in the United States.

SLHMC looks to stop that kind of cost from weighing down American communities and families by creating healthy relationships from the very beginning.

"I went into marriage education because I saw the transforming power of my own marriage of 32 years," Brennan said. "We tend to take marriage for granted today. People need to know it is hard, they need help, but that there are rewards for hanging in there. In general, when people work together for a common goal, they are happier, healthier and wealthier."

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