



Everything Michigan

Marriage Matters making a difference with local couples

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Tarryl Jackson | Jackson Citizen Patriot

Shelby Raines hears stories about people's marriages all the time.

She gets approached by local residents who want to tell her about their relationships, even in line at McDonald's.

Of those people, several have told her they wished her organization — Marriage Matters Jackson — was around when their marriages hit a rocky point.

"We've had counselors, clergy and judges say, 'Thank you, we love you because you offer something before things get to the crisis point,'" said Raines, the organization's managing director. "We want to swim upstream and be proactive."

In the past four years, Marriage Matters Jackson has worked to promote marriage, prepare couples for a healthy marriage and preserve already healthy marriages. It has offered resources to thousands in the area.

During the past year, more than 1,200 people have attended the organization's events.

It was recently granted nonprofit status, is working to expand its education and fundraising efforts, and finding out what impact it's had on the Jackson community.

"We're trying to make a cultural shift to healthy marriages and healthy relationships," Raines said.

Marriage Matters is conducting a follow-up survey in the area similar to one the group had in October 2006.

At that time, 400 Jackson County residents were interviewed about their views on marriage. More than 80 percent said they could not name any organization that provided marriage or relationship help. The nonprofit is hoping more people know where to turn to now.

Marriage Matters came to be after the Weatherwax Foundation — the organization's primary funding source — found that many community problems related to education, health and finances had a common denominator: family breakdown.

"If we can strengthen these families at their very foundation, these problems will start to go away," Raines said. "It's a common-sense approach that we're going for."

Marriage Matters promotes the idea that marriage is good for people's love lives, happiness, finances and health, and good for the community as a whole.

"There's wonderful benefits to being married," said Tonya Redding, marketing director. "There is a reason why marriage exists."

The group — which has an annual budget of about \$400,000 and a staff of five — offers programs for everyone from teens to seniors and has workshops for single people, those who are seriously dating, engaged or married and for marriages that are on the rocks. It will soon offer relationship workshops at local businesses.

The top three stressors in a marriage are money, children and sex, Raines said. The nonprofit's event this Thursday — "Get Some (in Your Marriage)" — pertains to the last on that list.

"People in healthy married relationships have a potential for great sex," Raines said.

Another focus for Marriage Matters is to reduce the number of divorces.

In Jackson County, there were 860 divorces filed in 2005, compared to 831 in 2009, according to the county clerk's office. Through late October, at least 729 divorces have been filed.

Jackson County Circuit Court Judge Chad Schmucker said he supports Marriage Matters' mission to cut down on the number of divorces.

"I've probably granted more divorces than any other judge in Jackson County," he said.

He is also seeing a lot of marriages that last no longer than a year.

"That's not unusual at all," Schmucker said. "A lot of short marriages are second, third and fourth marriages, but they're still marriages."

Linda Schwalm, sexual-assault program coordinator at AWARE, Inc. in Jackson, knew about a marriage coalition in Lenawee County and was looking for a similar organization in Jackson County. She found out about Marriage Matters.

Since then, she has held workshops for two years that focus on understanding what it takes to have a healthy relationships for the shelter's female clients.

"When I come to the last workshop, they say, 'Please, let's do another one,'" Schwalm said. "There is such good information."

Sharon and Doug Barnes have been married just over 11 years. Doug's first wife of 27 years died of breast cancer two years before he met Sharon, who had been divorced for 20 years.

"God was the one that put us together through a blind date set up by mutual friends," said Sharon Barnes, 61. "Marriage Matters has been another way to enhance (our marriage)."

Barnes said the Marriage Matters events have been a fun way for the couple to grow closer.

"I think it is a wonderful chance for couples to see their relationships in a new light and improve on them," she said. "No relationship is perfect and always has room for improvement."

Spring Arbor resident Ken Seneff has attended several Marriage Matters events with his wife Faith, whom he has been married to for five years.

“They promote people who are in a great marriage,” Seneff said. “We really enjoyed that.”

Upcoming event

Marriage Matters Jackson is hosting “Get Some (in Your Marriage)” on Thursday at the Michigan Theatre, 124 N. Mechanic St. Motivational speaker and author Mark Gungor will share with couples the five steps needed to experience great sex.

Doors open at 6:30 p.m. and the event starts at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are \$49 per couple and include dessert.

For more information, call Marriage Matters at 796-5116 or visit www.marriagemattersjackson.com.

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