

# Engaged couples embrace marriage prep program

By Mary Ann Chezik

Many engaged couples face marriage preparation with some trepidation: they have precious little time for scheduling something else to do before the wedding; they fear being judged by the church or those who run the programs; they also fear having to share personal information in large groups of people, and they don't think they will be able to find a program open before their wedding.

So when they come to a Pre-Cana program, they are often stressed and wary.

In the Diocese of Camden, some of the first engaged couples to experience the new program promoted by the diocese, "Preparing to Live in Love," are finding their experience to be so enriching and helpful, and they are so enthusiastic about it, that they are insisting that their engaged siblings and friends sign up for the same experience, too.

What is turning the hesitant and wary engaged couples into promoters of this program? It is the experience of working with welcoming and enthusiastic mentor couples — one on one — through an experiential curriculum that offers practical life skills in a positive, pro-active mindset.

Michelle and Jason Westenberg, married last May at Holy Family Parish in Sewell, were one of the first couples in the area to be referred to mentors, Dick and Marie Schmitt. They were nervous about their first meeting and wondered how they would get through seven of these sessions, but the warm greeting and the friendliness of the Schmitts dispelled their fears.

By the third meeting, they were looking forward to the sessions. Then life threw them a curve: both Michelle and Jason had serious health problems to deal with: Michelle was in the hospital for over a month with an infection after surgery, while Jason was facing surgery for a tumor behind his eye.

This is where the mentoring format made a tough situation easier. The flexibility to adjust their sessions eased their mind about being able to meet and finish before the wedding date.

"Through all of this we became very close to Dick and Marie. We consider them our mentors and friends for life. We invited them to our wedding and have referred our friends to them for mentoring, too," says Michelle.

When asked what most impressed them with the program, Jason answered, "We had to write the wedding vows out and then write what they meant to us. The vows took on new and deeper meaning for us on the altar and weren't just words we repeated. We also had homework to do each time and that made us write

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our deeper and more personal feelings for each other. At the end of the seven sessions we have a box filled with our workbooks to go back to, and we find that we have been using the skills we learned almost every day."

Meghan and Drew Silich of Pennsauken are married 15 months and have also referred their friends and family members to the Preparing to Live in Love mentoring program. They were mentored by Bob and Ruth Arata in Philadelphia where Meghan grew up.

Meghan was the one who did the research into the pre-cana options the couple had available to them. She had heard stories from her friends of pre-cana programs where couples listened to speakers, but came away feeling they had gained no usable skills for marriage or anything they could build upon.

When asked what was most different about their mentoring experience from the experiences of her friends, Meghan said, "We thought we knew each other well, but through the homework and discussions, stuff came out that was eye-opening. I got to know Drew much better."

Drew added, "What we learned at one session 'marinated' over the week between sessions, and we grew from it as a couple. By the next session, we were ready for the next topic and assignment."

Another important revelation to Meghan was the idea of marriage as a vocation: "I had no idea that marriage was a vocation and that our 'job' was to love each other. That was new to me. Drew went to Catholic school and kind of knew that, but now we both have that vision for our marriage."

And is going to Living in Love as a married couple in their future? "Definitely!" says Drew.

Enthusiasm for the program and the skills it gives them — along with the idea that there is a way to revisit the skills once they are married through their mentors and also through the Living in Love weekend — is making the Preparing to Live in Love program of marriage preparation the preferred choice of engaged couples in the diocese.

To have an engaged couple paired with a mentor couple or for more information about the mentoring process, please call Dick and Marie Schmitt, diocesan Preparing to Live in Love coordinators, at 856-435-1629, or email them at schmitt31895@comcast.net

Mary Ann Chezik is a Living in Love Program volunteer.



Meghan and Drew Silich, pictured at their wedding, recently participated in the Preparing to Live in Love mentoring program.

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