

Enthusiastic mentors transform the Pre-Cana experience

By Mary Ann Chezik



In the 15 months since the first Living in Love weekend was held in May 2010, 106 married couples have attended the program, with 27 couples currently certified as mentor couples and more couples signing up for the Living in Love Every Day/Mentor Training course after every Living in Love weekend.

The new mentor couples represent a spectrum of family life and marriage experiences, from the young couples in their 20s who are just beginning their families and careers to the retired couples with 35 or 40 years of marriage and grandchildren.

One of the couples who recently mentored their first engaged couple is David and Catherine Earp of Christ the King Parish in Haddonfield, married for 12 years and the parents of four daughters, ages 2 through 8.

Catherine and David attended a Living in Love weekend last fall when their parish hosted it. When asked why they went, Catherine replied, "We were intrigued by Ron and Kathy's message (when they spoke at our parish). It was so refreshingly different than all the other messages on marriage that we had heard in or from the Catholic Church."

They went with an open mind and an interest in improving their marriage.

Added Catherine, "Honestly, I don't think we expected to be so gripped by it as we were. The weekend is filled with laughter and maybe a few tears, too, but ultimately it contains the most pertinent information and skill-building practices for married couples today. It doesn't force 'Catholic concepts' down your throat, but it does present them in a palatable manner that shows how to do more for your marriage, your children, and your church. Yes, it does all that!"

After the weekend, they decided to continue the eight session small group "Living in Love Every Day," which is also the training for becoming a mentor. "Mentoring sounded like a great idea, but for someone else. It wasn't until the end of the LILED course that we felt confident in sharing this material with engaged couples," says David.

Before Living in Love, the couple attended Mass and had their children in religious education, but they were not very active in the life of the parish. So far, the Earps have mentored one "delightful" couple.

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Catherine and David Earp of Christ the King Parish, Haddonfield, are mentors in the Living in Love Every Day program. They are pictured with their four children.

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They arranged the mentoring sessions in the evening after their children were settled in bed, if not already asleep. One advantage that they have found to being mentors is that “the prep that we do beforehand gives us the opportunity to revisit the concepts as we are utilizing them in our own lives, and we benefit from the review.”

When asked about their own traditional Pre-Cana experience, Catherine described it as “satisfactory but not really uplifting. We felt like that format breezed quickly through a dry rendition of how to coexist, but we really had much greater ambitions for our married life together. We found what we hoped for in the Living in Love program, and we are looking forward to our next opportunity to mentor an engaged couple.”

Like the Earps, Nancy and Kent Van Amburg were intrigued by a pulpit talk after a Mass at their parish, Incarnation Parish in Mantua. They have been married 28 years and have two adult daughters and a grandchild. They have been active in their parishes as a lector, Eucharistic Minister, catechist or RCIA volunteer, and are always looking for ways to serve.

Nancy had several reasons for wanting to attend a Living in Love weekend: they were new to Incarnation Parish, and she felt that this might be a way to meet people who shared their belief in strong marriages. They also wanted to feel like they were part of a community, which they missed after their move to a new parish.

Nancy was interested enough to check out the Living in Love website, where she learned about the Living in Love Every Day eight session small group follow-up. They both were willing to do something to strengthen their marriage, but they saw the small group sessions as a way to build a small faith community in the parish,



too. How did it work out? “We had a blast! We all hated to see it end. Every session built on the weekend and gave us practical tools. We loved it,” said Nancy.

Kent added, “We knew we had a good marriage, but now we have a great one. My one regret is that we didn’t have this program 28 years ago when we got married.”

By the end of the LILED sessions, they were anxious to put the principles into action with their first engaged couple. The seven sessions of Preparing to Live in Love stretched over the summer months, and over that time Kent and Nancy saw their couple grow and change.

The young couple was nervous about the process, but they were also nervous about marriage in general. But by session three, Kent and Nancy said, “We could tell they were doing their homework, and they had embraced the program, using the tools they were given and working through things. The program has some great tools to get couples growing together. And at the end of the sessions, we told them, ‘We are still your mentors — you can call us or email us any time.’ I think we got as much out of it as they did!”

Kent added, “I think we helped the couple see a different side of the church — the human side — along with the importance of faith. In a way, we mentors are ‘marriage missionaries’ in a world where marriage is under attack. We are here to uphold the sanctity of the sacrament of marriage and to let that be known in the world.”

When asked what he would tell a married couple who might be hesitant about going to a Living in Love week-

end, Kent said, “This is a gift that you can give your marriage. Do it!”

The next Living in Love weekends in the Diocese of Camden are:

— Oct. 15-16 at St. Rita Parish in Bellmawr, Mary Mother of the Church site

— Nov. 12-13 at St. Charles Borromeo Parish in Sicklerville

— March 3-4 at St. Vincent de Paul Parish in Mays Landing

For more information, or to register, go to www.livinginlove.org

Mary Ann Chezik is a Living in Love Program volunteer.



Mentors Nancy and Kent Van Amburg of Incarnation Parish, Mantua.

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