

Making marriages work

Engagement 'encounter' allows couples to think before 'they do'

"Till death do us part" seems to contradict Oregon's 44-percent divorce rate, but a special weekend retreat may help those contemplating married life from becoming another statistic.

Resolving problems before marriage is the emphasis of "Engaged Encounter," a weekend getaway that costs \$75 per couple. The retreat takes engaged couples away from the city and along the McKenzie River to allow time for reflection and candid discussion about their future together.

Although the sessions are sponsored by local Catholic Church affiliates, they are open to anyone regardless of religious background. Married couples and a priest volunteer their time to act as hosts to the engaged couples.

Frank discussions in which married couples share personal experiences about their own engagements and married lives will help engaged couples know what's ahead, according to Father Patrick La Belle of the Eugene Newman Center.

Aside from group discussions, engaged couples spend most of their time alone together. Each couple keep separate journals which later are read by the other partner.

Responses to questions such as "Have you ever been bored or lost interest in your partner and why?" and "Which of the following areas have I been afraid to talk to you about: sex?, drinking?, children?" are logged in their journals and exchanged to

compare what the other has written. During this time, the two can talk out any issues.

Peter and Katy Mangin attended Engaged Encounter last October. Peter is a University graduate and Katy is a student.

They say the encounter was a definite benefit to their relationship.

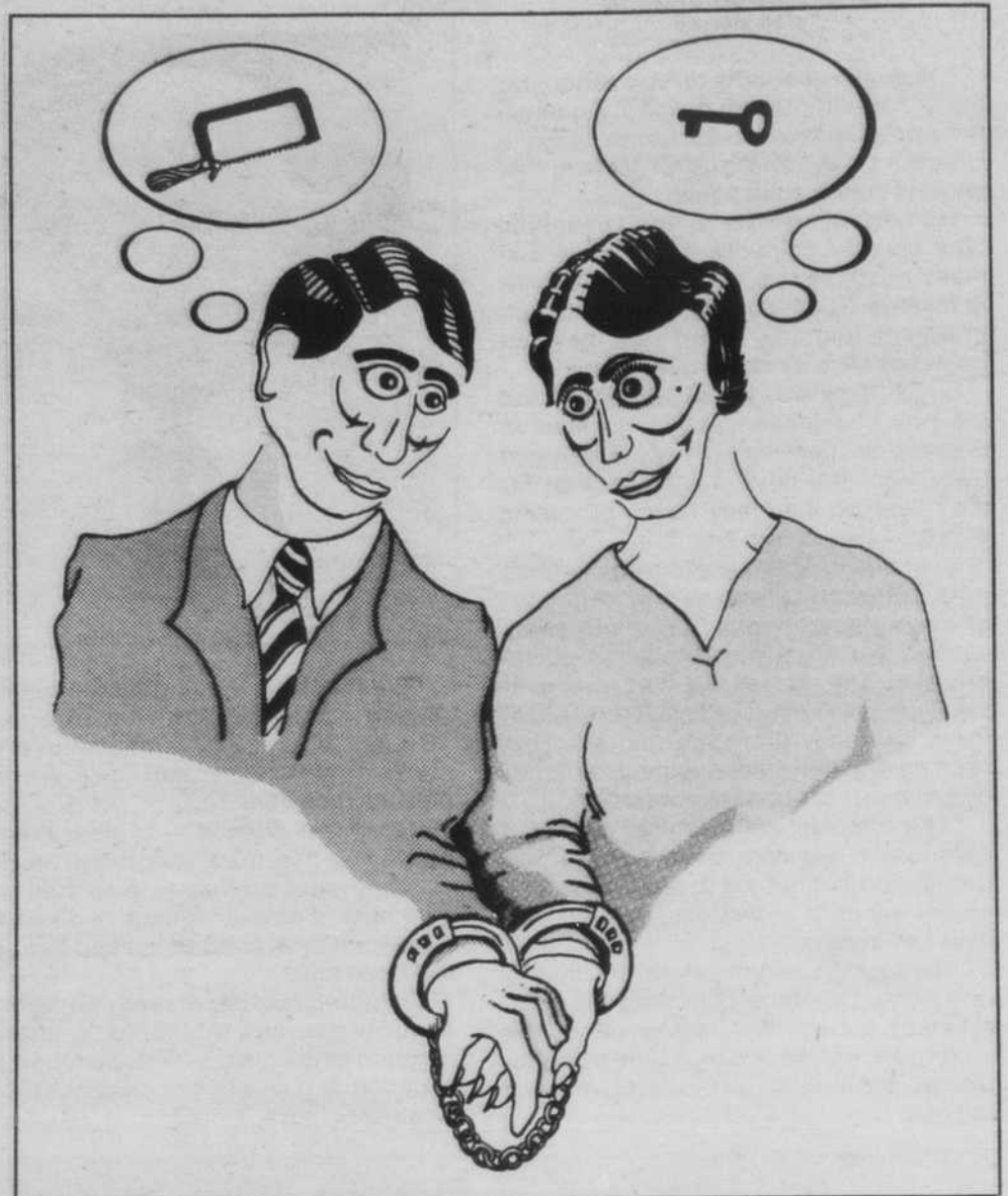
Faced with questions like "Who's going to cook?", "Who will do the banking?" and "How frequently do you expect to have sex?", the two say they reviewed matters they'd face in their marriage which are often ignored or had taken for granted during an engagement period.

"If there were questions couples had about each other, things that they were not going to work through, they'd find out," Katy Mangin says. "I'm certain some people might be surprised to find that their priorities on certain issues are different."

"The encounter really gets down to the nitty-gritty. You take so many things for granted when you think you know someone inside and out," she says.

The weekend centered on intimate discussion, but the Mangins found they weren't the only ones revealing themselves. The married hosts leading group discussions disclosed various anecdotes and recollections of their early years of marriage.

"Somehow the joking cushioned what we had to say too," Katy Mangin adds, "especially if something was particularly difficult to express."



Program teaches marriage communication skills

Getting married is a little like learning to drive a car, says a University psychology professor. In order to drive a car we take classes, learn the skill and obtain a license.

A married couple must obtain a license too, says Robert Weiss, but they never are required to learn marriage skills.

"We spend more time teaching people how to drive safely than we do teaching people how to get along," says Weiss who is also a marriage specialist.

Weiss directs the Oregon Marital Studies Program, designed to help couples get along

through improved communication skills. The program is taught by psychology professors and graduate students and offers answers to couples who wish to improve their relationships or acquire skills to help work through conflicts.

"We advocate couples be in a position to resolve their differences," Weiss explains. "If they can't, well that's OK, but we don't want to see couples getting divorced because the ash trays were full or because someone was wearing the wrong perfume."

Because society tends to

romanticize marriage, couples don't see marriage as part of their daily experiences, he says. "That is why people crack. Couples aren't prepared for it."

Cliches like "If you love me you'll know what I want" or "Sex is supposed to be easy" are irrational and get in the way of a good relationship.

The marital studies program chooses not to talk in terms of "problems" but in terms of "skills," Weiss says. "Research tells us certain things. We know the impact your partner has on you in terms of communication skills, so your relationship five

years from now is predictable."

The program teaches pre-marriage enrichment, works with couples in their initial years of marriage and counsels very distressed couples. Depending on a couples' needs, the program might incorporate negotiation, problem-solving exercises and even video-taping.

"Living with another person does not come naturally," Weiss says. "People need to get it through their heads that like any skill — swimming, writing, dancing, art — a good marriage doesn't just happen. It takes practice."

Stories by Mary Campbell

Graphic by Michael Schafbuch

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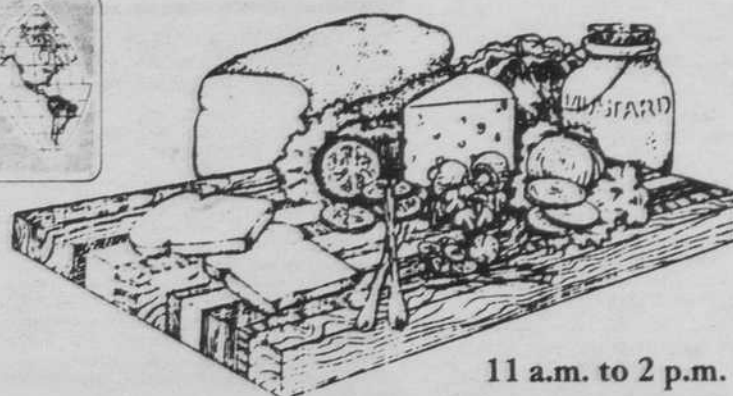
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