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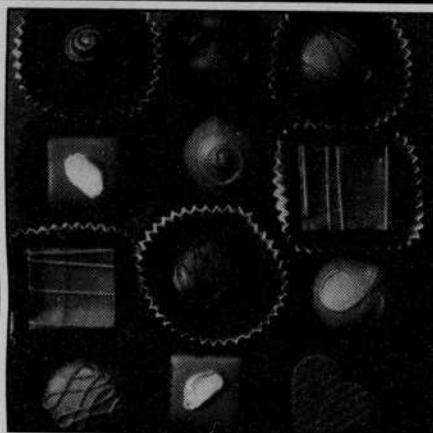
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For better or worse

For one student couple,
marriage is the next logical
step in a lifetime of love

BY CATHERINE RYAN
DAILY EMERALD FREELANCE REPORTER

Dec. 25 was not Rikki Higgins' typical Christmas. Normally, the University senior's family opens stockings together on Christmas morning. This year, the family decided to skip the tradition, so Higgins' boyfriend, senior Michael Ford, packed her a stocking.

The two sat in Higgins' living room next to the fireplace while she pulled hair scrunchies, lip gloss and M&M's (her favorite candy) out of the red snowman-embroidered stocking. She then grabbed a candy cane that came with an attached diamond engagement ring. Ford asked her to stand, then kneeled and proposed.

"She seemed shocked when she saw the ring," Ford said. "She didn't know how to comprehend it at first."

The two are part of a minority of engaged and married students on campus. In addition to worrying about graduating in June — she in psychology and he in geography — they are planning to buy a house and get married in December.

While they have complete support from family and friends, the couple has encountered some negative reactions to their engagement.

"They say, 'You're too young. Why'd you want to get married, it hardly ever works out,'" Higgins said.

The two realize that marriage is a challenge, so they are attending premarital counseling. This is the first serious relationship for both of them.

Higgins, 21, and Ford, 22, are postponing their wedding date from August to December at the urging of family members.

Ford said he knew he loved Higgins and didn't want to postpone their union too long.

"God's telling you that she's who you're going to marry," Ford said. "It's really hard to put something off like that when you know that's who you're going to be with for the



COURTESY

Rikki Higgins and Michael Ford spend time together over the holiday break. The two got engaged on December 25.

rest of your life."

Ford wasn't the only one who knew the two were meant for each other. His longtime friend, Higgins' cousin Matt Gregory, introduced the two and saw the spark between them.

Although he acquainted them, Gregory denies his role as matchmaker.

"They're both the nicest people I know," Gregory said. "They were bound to run into each other."

Their major disagreement about the wedding plans was over the alcohol for their reception. Ford wanted kegs, but Higgins hoped for mixed drinks, fearing that kegs would encourage overindulgence and look tacky. Doing what couples should do, they compromised: The kegs will stay behind the bar, where servers can pour beer and cocktails.

So what does the happy couple have planned for Valentine's Day?

Absolutely nothing.

"I hate Valentine's Day," Higgins said, relating her dislike of the holiday to the pressure she felt when she was single.

Even though she now has a partner, she prefers expressing her feelings on any regular day.

"It's more special if you do it on a day that's not set aside for that," she said.

Despite her aversion to Feb. 14, Higgins is energetically planning another date she'll celebrate for many years to come: her wedding day. She attends bridal shows, looks for reception venues and has picked a church for the ceremony. Ford accompanies her to the shows but mostly observes, leaving the details to Higgins.

"All I have to do is show up on that day and I'll be fine," he said. "It's all about her that day."

Heart healthy

The University Health Center provides free relationship therapy sessions for couples at its annual V-Day event

BY EVA SYLWESTER
NEWS REPORTER

One of the cheapest Valentine's Day gifts available this year is a chair — that is, a free hour in the therapy chair at the University of Oregon Center for Family Therapy as part of its third annual Valentine's Relationship Checkup.

CFT interns will volunteer from noon to 8 p.m. on Feb. 12 and 13 giving free therapeutic consultations. The interns are graduate students in the University's nationally accredited Marriage and Family Therapy program.

CFT Director John Miller said CFT chose Valentine's Day as the time for its relationship checkup service because it's a "national day when people come to recognize their relationships in a happy way."

For the relationship checkup, clients can make an appointment or just show up. After clients fill out a few brief forms and decide what they would like to talk to a therapist about, a therapist will take them to a

therapy room. Miller emphasized that the one-hour session does not focus on personality tests.

"Just having a conversation ... directed by (the couple) is most useful," Miller said.

At the end of the session, therapists will discuss the couple's strengths and offer follow-up questions and suggestions for improvement, if desired. Miller said last year 85 percent of clients at the Valentine's

Day event said they were satisfied or highly satisfied with their experience, and half of the clients found their needs were met with one visit. Therapists gave clients referrals and advice on other resources in about 10 to 20 percent of cases, Miller said. "There's no great expectation that it'll be an earth-moving event. It's not meant for that. It's a checkup with a therapist to see what the next steps might be," Miller said.

The event is not confined to

traditional heterosexual couples. Parent-child pairs, individuals and gay and lesbian couples are also welcome.

"We want to open it up to the LGBT population to come in. That's something we want to emphasize this year," Miller said, adding that even couples who already have great relationships can — and do — often come to this event.

"We often get couples in a very proactive state doing things for the relationship, and it's encouraging for the interns," Miller said.

The main objective of the event is to reach out to people who haven't been to therapy before, but would profit from the services of an objective listener.

"Half of the people who would benefit from counseling services never come in. It would never cross their mind to see a therapist. There's this great service out there, and few people take advantage of it. If they do come, about two-thirds of the time they will improve," Miller said.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit the Center for Family Therapy office at 720 East 13th Ave., Suite 304, or call 346-3296.

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