



African American Healthy Marriage Initiative Newsletter

Administration for Children and Families
Office of Regional Operations
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ACF Navigation Key

1. Visit the AAHMI Website at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/aa_hmi/AAHMI.html
2. Visit the Healthy Marriage Initiative website at www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage
3. Visit the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center www.healthymarriageinfo.org

AAHMI Research Proceedings
<http://sww.unc.edu/jif/>

SAVE THE DATE
AAHMI Research Conference, June 19-21, 2007 at North Carolina, Chapel Hill



Behind the Flash

Based on “Why Marriage Matters,” the first marriage education course in *Basic Training for Couples* held February 8, 2007, Washington, DC. East Capital Center for Change is the grantee funded by ACF. Wedded Bliss Foundation facilitates the *Basic Training for Couples* Curriculum.

By Emily Hull, Healthy Marriage Specialist

Chandler looked skeptical as I flashed the camera. He kept chewing on his barbecued chicken, a complimentary gift for attending that evening. In fact, transportation, child care and instruction were all free of charge. Incentives to come couldn't be better, but all of the sixteen couples at the table wore varied expressions—some content, some hungry, some nervous. After all, they were at a marriage education class offered by Wedded Bliss, a grantee funded by the Administration for Children and Families. Most people on the street can't tell you what marriage education is: “therapy maybe?” And these couples didn't know much more at the outset either.

By the end of the class, however, the tenor in the room changed. The 8-week long program *Basic Training for Couples* led by co-founder Nisa Muhammad and instructor Jamil Muhammad teaches couples on how to attain a happy, healthy marriage. By providing tools and access to skills to those who choose marriage for themselves, the class is education, not therapy, in a powerful way. In these courses couples achieve greater results for their children and for themselves. Jamil quoted several research outcomes that night: “Kids in two-parent homes fare better in a host of ways: lower delinquency, higher educational attainment, better health, higher self-esteem. Men and women who are married make more money, are healthier, live longer and report higher emotional stability and happiness than those who aren't married.” He continued, “did you know that 90% of kids at the most elite institutions of higher education in the country—the Yales, the Stanfords—come from two-parent, married households? Yes, it takes two to get a child there.”

Upcoming Issues will include:

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Media Pulse
1-Minute Research
What is the HMI?
Couples' Speak
Sharpen Your Skills
Nontrivial Trivia
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ACF Navigation Key

The Healthy Marriage Initiative

is for couples who choose marriage for themselves to develop skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy marriage. It is a strategy for achieving child well-being, recognizing that children do best when raised by both parents in a committed, healthy marriage.

So what's so magical about the "M" word? Why are couples who choose an official ceremony and licensure better off than those who cohabit? As Nisa said, "marriage orders your life. It provides a script to follow." When a man knows he's providing for children and a wife, he's more apt to take care of himself. When a couple is strong, befriended and committed, they take care of each other. There's a mutual incentive because the couple is a unit, not two independent entities. The concept of teamwork and sacrifice for the common



good becomes real. Nisa continued: "a happy marriage is intentional. You make it happen every day by the conscious choices you make, by how you treat each other." The purpose of these classes, Jamil added, "is to provide a program of loving behaviors, to inform you on the benefits of a healthy marriage, to give you tools to resolve conflict and communicate better, and to enlist you in our battle to change our communities."

As he proceeded with the rise and fall of marriage in today's society, some of the couples looked perplexed, others distraught. This was undoubtedly the first time someone had described a timeline with subsequent events that were for or against healthy marriages and families: the number of married households is at 55.2 million or 49.7% in America, down from 52% just 5 years ago (Roberts, 2006). In 2004 67.8% of children were raised in two-parent households compared to 85.3% in 1970. Especially in the black community, marriage is suffering with only 41% wed compared to 62% of whites and 60% of Hispanics (AAHMI, 2003), and 69% of African American births are to unmarried women, compared to 25% for whites and 42% for Hispanics (AAHMI, 2003).

Despite these sobering statistics, the June 2006 Gallup Poll found that blacks nevertheless embrace matrimony as an important institution and in greater numbers than whites (Saad, 2006). There was proof that night evinced by the fact that 16 couples, several with

children, all with jobs and other time constraints, chose to sit in the Marshall Heights Community Center for an orientation on why marriage matters.

Not only their presence, but their participation showed the love and hope these couples shared for improving their unions, and making, as Nisa said, "good unions better. If you don't want your relationship to change, leave now. Because it will be stronger by the end of these eight weeks—we guarantee it." At the outset, couples were asked to list three things they loved about their spouse: "her beautiful smile, she's a wonderful mother to my children, he's 'my man, my protector,' when he's committed he's committed." Couples smiled and squeezed hands. Later they were assigned to make one request of their spouse for the upcoming week: preferences, soft spots, and idiosyncrasies appeared as couples asked for: "30 minutes of no-business talk when I get home from work," "do the taxes," or "complete and total honesty, 24/7 for the next seven days." Jamil and Nisa acknowledged that no marriage is perfect because people aren't perfect: everyone has their normal ups and downs, but this class teaches couples how "to settle on the best part, not the poor part." Other requests were heart-warming, as one engaged young man asked his sweetheart to read *The Fate of Africa*, specifically the history of the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda. With his thick accent and ebony skin, he was asking her to explore another part of his identity. Another wife coyly grinned at her husband and asked for two bubble baths.

At the end, couples were challenged to pick three songs that represented how they felt about their spouse to bring to the next class. Also, they were to research their family tree to trace their personal histories of marriage. As the couples prepared to leave, some pulled out chairs or opened doors for the other, others packaged extra mashed potatoes and strawberry crême pie to take home. The warm fuzzies were kindled.



Then the partition to childcare burst open and several little girls, full of kisses and excitement, donning

leopard print hats leaped into their mother's arms. The youngest flashed me a toothless grin as I pulled out my camera. Behind the flash, however, it hit me: here lies the truth for why we do what we do at ACF in the AAHMI. This is why marriage education is a new, burgeoning field in the United States, why couples on the street when told about marriage education, though skeptical at the outset, nod after hearing the research and reasons for how it changes lives. This is why it's being tested in essentially every state in the union for the next five years: do these programs work? Will they strengthen couples and families? Will they defray social service costs for the state and the couple? If married couples are stronger in their relationships, will they be stronger in grappling with the challenges of life? You look at only this one class and the hope in the participants' eyes, and you say, yes. Americans still care deeply about marriage: 90% eventually tie the knot (Building Real Solutions, 2006). In fact, in 2005 more than 6,000 marriages took place each day (Census Bureau, 2007). People want to be happy with their loved one. They want to make it work.

Attend a class. Judge for yourself. As Nisa said, "there's a 100% success rate."



Please send questions or comments to Emily Hull, Healthy Marriage Specialist, at Emily.Hull@acf.hhs.gov

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SAVE THE DATE

Black Marriage Day
March 25

is sponsored by Wedded Bliss Foundation. Go to:
<http://www.blackmarriage.com/> *to find an event in your region.*

