

Faces of Hope | Felicia Thomas-Lynn

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Holding on, for richer or poorer



Photo by Jack Orton

Selena Webb-Ebo and her husband, Jermaine Ebo, play Connect Four with their children, Sienna, 2, and Jermaine, 5, at their Milwaukee home. Selena is a marriage educator who is seeing more couples with strained marriages because of financial difficulties.

Classes give couples tools to salvage marriages

With the economic downturn, the Ebo family is making the necessary adjustments.

Instead of eating out two or three times a week, Selena Webb-Ebo, her husband Jermaine and their two children prepare meals at home.

They haven't taken a family vacation in two years, and instead of buying a new second car, they've decided to nurse along their old one.

"All of our decisions have been altered," Webb-Ebo said. "The things that we would normally do, we have decided not to."

But as a marriage educator, she sees an increasing number of couples who haven't made adjustments and are struggling to meet their financial challenges. Their marriages are starting to crumble beneath the economic strain.

"Even previous to the recession and economic downturn, one of the top five issues causing problems in a marriage is money. That only intensifies when a spouse loses a job," said Webb-Ebo, who specializes in crisis management as an educator with the Vow to Succeed program at the Center for Self-Sufficiency.

The nonprofit organization is the lead agency for the Milwaukee Marriage Partnership.

The partnership, going into its third year, is a coalition of community-based groups funded through a three-county federal demonstration grant.

Its aim is to promote the value and benefits of healthy relationships and marriages.

So far, the Vow to Succeed program has served more than 1,500 adults, including married couples, in Milwaukee, Kenosha and Racine counties, said Jeanette Stevens, the center's program director who heads up its Midwest operations.

Stevens said now more than ever before, families are facing financial strife, and that is causing a breakdown in communication for a lot of couples.

"We are getting a lot of people who are in crisis," said Stevens, who stresses that the program doesn't offer one-on-one marriage counseling.

"Our curriculum gives couples skills and tools to eliminate the problems they are having," she said. "We are trying to prevent them from needing marriage counseling or getting a divorce."

Webb-Ebo said that in this economic climate, she is seeing more couples fighting over their finances whether it's a spouse who hasn't adjusted spending habits to meet financial difficulties or one who has lost a job and hasn't quickly found another one.

"That is an unrealistic expectation in this economy," said Webb-Ebo, who teaches couples stress-management techniques and how to set realistic goals and expectations. "The beauty of this program is that we get couples to understand themselves, who they are individually, and they come up with their own solutions."

Brian and Jennifer Ingram, who recently participated in the program, said the sessions helped them to get beyond petty arguments "that would go on for hours" and get to the underlying issues that caused the conflict.

"We were at a rough patch for a while. The sessions were a big turning point in our relationship," said Jennifer Ingram, who is studying to be a nurse but took on a part-time job to help the family make ends meet. It lightened her husband's financial load as the family's breadwinner.

For his part, Brian Ingram said the sessions helped him to "stop blowing up so much. At first I didn't want to go. But I found out it wasn't textbook stuff, what they discuss is real-life stuff."

Faces of Hope focuses on Milwaukee-area people who need a hand and the agencies that are helping them. By Felicia Thomas-Lynn fthomas-lynn@journal sentinel.com or 414.224.2073.