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Why You Should Care About Marriage In America

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One of the best things we can do for our country is to strengthen and support marriage.

Some Americans see marriage as something they can go in and out of if it becomes unrewarding or difficult; some see it as unnecessary to their lives. But deep down, most people wish they could have a rewarding lifelong commitment with their spouse. Marriage, by its very nature, is intended to be a covenant relationship, not consumer relationship. In the midst of many external challenges, we forget how marriage can benefit our personal lives. We are losing our determination and the skills to keep our marriages healthy and strong.

This is a major reason for a new initiative called National Marriage Week USA. The initiative will run this year from February 7 - 14. Surprisingly, several other countries, including the UK, Germany, the Czech Republic, Ireland and Australia all have had significant public awareness and activities for National Marriage Week for the last 20 years.

If you hadn't heard about it, the week leading up to Valentine's Day has had some U.S. attention since 2002 by those in the marriage education field. But a new initiative in 2010 seeks to build a broader collaboration and to elevate marriage to the national attention it deserves.

Marriage is in crisis. A new Marriage Index released in October, 2009 reports that in 1970 nearly 80 percent of all adult Americans were married; today that has dropped to 57 percent. The Marriage Index also reports that today 40 percent of all American children are born out of wedlock, with 70 percent of babies in African-American families born without a married mother and father.

Why should we care? Because marriage is the best way to overcome poverty, and it is proven as the best circumstance for raising children. Research overwhelmingly shows that lack of marriage or divorce impoverishes women and children. In addition, boys reared apart from their father are twice as more likely to spend time in prison by age 32 as those who were raised in a married home headed by their own mother and father. Teenage girls who are raised by their own father are much more likely to resist the

advances of boys or young men who do not have their best interests at heart. In fact, 35 percent of adolescent girls whose father left before the age of six became pregnant, compared to just 5 percent of girls who were raised by their mother and father. Research also overwhelmingly makes the case that married folks live longer, enjoy better health, greater personal happiness, more well adjusted children, and greater financial stability. (All research references can be found at www.nationalmarriageweekUSA.org)

Americans must start to credit anew the personal, social and cultural value of marriage. In April 2008, economists reported that it costs U.S. taxpayers a whopping \$112 billion a year for divorce and unwed childbearing. In these devastating economic times, Americans of all stripes and persuasions need to put on their activist boots and get to work to re-build a culture that values traditional marriage and learns again, as many from earlier generations did, how to become responsible and thriving married people.

It can be discouraging to hear this generation's stories about failed politicians and formerly revered athletes like Tiger Woods. But there are many positive, untold stories from the heroic work done daily by scores of marriage educators about unions restored and families put back on track. It's also true that folks need help, but they don't always know where to get it.

National Marriage Week USA seeks to strengthen individual marriages, reduce the divorce rate, and build a stronger marriage culture. If we can accomplish those goals we will also help reduce poverty and strengthen our children. Together we can make more impact than working alone. We want folks across the country to recommit to work on their own marriages, to mobilize their community to get on board and to work together to host special marriage conferences and events, launch a marriage class or home group, or stir create or news coverage on the local level.

Every other skill in this country has a school—literally a facility of bricks and mortar. But not marriage. Religious institutions are possibly the greatest avenue to become a natural “school” for marriage. Church leaders understand that marriages within the church may be hurting just as much as those outside of the church. But only 28 percent of churches in America offer even one marriage course, so local congregations can be a powerful first place to start a new concerted effort to strengthen marriage. Church leaders can get started by listening to a one-hour Webinar by leading pastors and social scientists to get practical advice on how to help at www.nationalmarriageweekUSA.org. Right now National Marriage Week USA is putting forth the call for a marriage ministry in every congregation in America.

There are stresses and challenges in the midst of raising children, maintaining jobs and paying the bills. But throughout my nearly 30 years of marriage, I've experienced something personally profound and have observed it countless times in others—when couples commit to work through their issues, learn about themselves and make changes to become more the person they need to be...then there is comfort, companionship, and greater financial stability on the other side of the conflict. There is no better way to go

into old age than with the person with whom you have weathered life's storms – the one who has been a witness to your life's journey.

Americans need to stop thinking of marriage as a consumer relationship—if we don't, we'll always want a refund or an exchange because there is no perfect product. But when we view marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman unto death, not as a throwaway consumer relationship, the chances are enormously higher for personal growth, better health, greater happiness, a longer life, and greater well being for our children.

Sheila Weber is the executive director of National Marriage Week USA and the “Let's Strengthen Marriage” campaign. To work on your own marriage, help others, or make a difference in your community— get information, research, and resources at www.nationalmarriageweekUSA.org. You can “Post an Event” and sort the list by state to find an event near your home. You can also click Join the Campaign and “Tell Us What You're Doing,” and read creative examples of what others are doing around the nation.