

Divorces, marriages on steady decline in Jackson County

Posted by Caitlin Schneider | Jackson Citizen Patriot August 09, 2009 06:00AM

The first time Scott Kudwa attended a workshop through [Marriage Matters Jackson](#) last fall, he went by himself. It was a shot in the dark, an effort to save his marriage.

"I was trying to find anything that could help," he said.

Marriage license applications

1998: 1,168

1999: 1,155

2000: 1,144

2001: 1,237

2002: 1,200

2003: 1,156

2004: 1,171

2005: 1,121

2006: 1,150

2007: 1,061

2008: 1,057

Divorces filed

1998: 1,012

1999: 979

2000: 983

2001: 1,033

2002: 879

Scott's wife, Liz, had filed for divorce about a week earlier. At the time reconciliation seemed unlikely, but after seven years together Scott thought it was worth the effort.

"You have to decide you want to make it better," he said.

The couple, both in their mid-30s, had done all the things a bride and groom are supposed to. They dated for about three years and went to premarital counseling through their church. But after the wedding, life got in the way, Scott said, and they found they had less time for each other.

The Marriage Matters workshops proved to be so helpful that Scott soon convinced Liz to come with him. Together, they began to fill the void that had grown between them.

Today they are still together, eager to offer their story to couples who are similarly stalled.

The Kudwas call themselves a success story only hesitantly, noting that marriage is an ongoing process that requires a lot of work. Their experience represents one facet of an increasingly complex maze of marriage and divorce statistics. The data is becoming harder to track, and consequently so is the story behind it.

One consistent progression from the last decade is divorce rates have been steadily declining in Jackson County and nationally.

In 1998, 1,012 couples filed for divorce, compared to 799 in 2008. While the numbers have fluctuated throughout the decade, overall they have been slowly shrinking.

Fewer divorce filings don't necessarily mean an improvement in the state of unions, though.

Marriage rates in the county are also dropping. Here, the numbers are more varied, but 100 fewer people wed in 2008 than 1998.

2003: 868

2004: 834

2005: 860

2006: 838

2007: 804

2008: 799

Divorce rates in Jackson County have long been higher than the state average. According to the United Way's 2008 Jackson County Community Report Card, the 2006 divorce rate for Jackson County was about 20 percent higher than the rate for Michigan.

Marriage Matters co-coordinator Tonya Redding said the higher numbers are likely related to the socioeconomic status of people in Jackson.

"There are correlations with employment statistics and education. The higher those are, the lower the likelihood for divorce," she said.

Redding said while the economy is a challenge for many couples, it can provide a "perfect teachable moment." She said Marriage Matters focuses on education rather than counseling, and that usually it has to do with teaching couples how to disagree.

Jackson marriage counselor Robert Pletcher said lower marriage and divorce numbers reflect the growing number of couples living together.

"Instead of getting married in their early 20s, people are cohabitating and those breakups aren't appearing in divorce statistics," he said.

Pletcher said young adults are disillusioned and frightened by the commitment of matrimony. For fear of making a mistake, pairs are living together instead of getting married, he said, but playing it safe doesn't ensure longevity.

A 2002 report from the [federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) showed that unmarried cohabitations "overall are less stable than marriages." According to the study, couples who live together have a 62 percent probability of breaking up after 10 years together as compared with 33 percent for a married pair.

Redding said often the problem with cohabitation is that couples enter the living situation with different expectations. One believes it's a precursor to marriage, while the other thinks it's a matter of convenience and cost efficiency. Even when they are on the same page, Redding said procrastination occurs when couples want the perfect wedding with a big-ticket budget.

Jackson attorney Eric White said he had not noticed a decline in the number of couples divorcing, but said the "nature of the proceedings" has changed with the sour economy.

"It's much more difficult to divide debt than an asset," he said. "Everyone wants half of an asset, nobody wants half of the debt."

White said the stress of negative equity can drive couples to divorce and that has been exacerbated by the economy.

"No question at all about that. I think (financial pressure) is one of the major reasons stated by people in divorce," he said.

While money woes can divide a couple, the economy can also keep people together even when they're unhappy. Couples in crisis sometimes choose to stay married to escape further financial strain.

Shelby Raines, co-coordinator for Marriage Matters Jackson, said poverty is one of the many wide-ranging implications of divorce.

"The reality is, as our economy is sinking, people are seeing the cost of divorce. It's slowing it down as the go-to option," she said.

Raines and Pletcher said couples considering divorce most commonly suffer from emotional distance.

Money, sex and family are frequently problem areas, and roadblocks cause couples to panic, Raines said.

"As soon as things aren't going well, people think they've made a big mistake," she said.

Liz said she and Scott only went through the motions with their premarital counseling.

"When you are going through that process, I think it's probably pretty common to be feeling like, 'OK this is one thing we have to check off on our list of things to do before we get married,'" she said.

The more "robust" tutoring the Kudwas received a few years into their marriage, proved to be a key ingredient to saving their relationship.

Pletcher said his work often boils down to helping couples learn to "speak the same language."

Liz Kudwa phrased it a bit differently.

"It's a matter of figuring out what your issues are and knowing that you're probably always going to have those issues," she said.

"You have to come up with a good way of working them out. It's not personal, there are just differences. For us, that made a tremendous difference."

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