

Sharing the wealth

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ner and homemaker into two equals.

"The first time I got out the vacuum, Donna looked at me as if I was saying she didn't do the job well," Jim recalls. The Fitches realized that was simply a trained attitude, not reflective of the relationship they wanted to share.

Once, says Donna, Jim handed her a check, saying it was for "her" grocery shopping. "When are you doing yours?" she responded.

Couples like the Fitches survive by communicating, as they explain. They'll be leaving their sons "the Good News according to Jim and Donna Fitch" — journals filled with letters they write to each other every day.

You don't get married to "settle down," they say. "Marriage is a process...and how you respect each other and interact with each other will make or break the process," says Donna.

Marriage Encounter gave the Fitches a sense of their marriage being brand new again. In fact, when they got home that weekend, one of the boys suggested they all go on a "honeymoon," so the eight of them did.

Donna reflects, "Jim didn't understand the idea of enrichment. Society emphasizes our ongoing education — bettering ourselves on our jobs — yet we don't take time for our marriages."

"Taking time" is one of the most important things a couple can do, she says. She and Jim take at least 15 to 20 minutes a day just to talk, and try to have dinner out once a week.

After the Marriage Encounter weekend, says Jim, "Our priorities got switched. My job took on less importance — our relationship became more important. Society has passed on that marriage is a 'woman's thing,' but we both see it as our priority. Society says our job is our vocation, but it's really not — marriage is our vocation; a job is our avocation."

Their marriage encounter experience was their "beginning of a call to share," say the Fitches.

The first thing they did when they accepted the job to oversee the marriage preparation course was to change its name. "Pre-Cana is not an affirming type of thing," says Donna. "We tried to change the emphasis. We wanted it to be more than having a doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief, priest. We wanted married couples and priests to work together — couples to share with other couples."

With all the role models on television today, says Donna, "We don't have society calling us to be more married. It's a process. Things just don't remain status quo. We shouldn't celebrate the sacrament, then just set it aside with the gifts. Somehow, we've been taught to think marriage always will stay the same, but we've

'Couples are not islands. Relationships take the support of other people.'

Jim Fitch

realized we have an ongoing call to love, and the model for that is Jesus."

"Sometimes you don't feel like it," Donna continues, "but Jesus didn't feel like hanging on the cross — he made the decision to."

Jim adds a statistic, for the sake of discussion. "A couple who shares their faith with each other and a faith community has a 400 per cent better chance for a successful marriage."

"There are couples married 29 years and happy about it," says Donna with a smile.

"A lot of couples split after the first three years of marriage because they've left that first stage — romance — and entered the second — disillusionment," says Jim.

Couples begin to ask, "Is this all there is?" If you get caught in this stage, that's where you walk, but if you can work through this stage, you can experience the joy of it."

Couples, says Donna, "need to see the pitfalls more as opportunities."

Donna has a theory that couples often go into marriage with this "big checklist" of things they never knew about each other, or knew and figured they could change after they were married.

Jim gives an example. "Donna, being a 'cradle Catholic' (she was born and raised

Catholic; he was Protestant until age 14), used to think I probably didn't have the kind of prayer life she had. One night we decided to pray together, and she discovered that while hers was rote, mine was more conversational — and just as beautiful."

"I've learned how to confront Jim, to argue lovingly," says Donna.

Today, Donna works full-time as a pastoral assistant at St. Mary's Church in downtown Rochester, and Jim continues his career with the bank, but both are just completing years of study in preparation for the church's diaconate, to which he will be ordained in May.

Both remain committed to marriage ministry, however, and continue to do things together — for example, the day they took just recently to speak to seniors at Cardinal Mooney High School about marriage.

One of the things they like to get across to young people and young couples, says Donna, "is that we live in a society that uses intimacy and sex as synonyms. Intimacy can have sexual components, but sex has become so much a commodity in today's society, we've lost some of the beauty and awe. It should be a celebration of the whole relationship. When we're involved in marriage preparation, we bring out the idea of couples who have sex outside of marriage, and we tell them that's what it really is. Making love implies making more love, which is what we are called to do, but we are also called to be committed. How can we feel called to love without commitment?"

Seeing couples get caught in that "disillusionment" stage over the years, the Fitches also have been instrumental in bringing Retrouvaille to the diocese of Rochester. It is a program designed for married couples in trouble, separated, or even divorced.

"We try to live by the idea that the relationship is always more important than the issue," says Donna.

"We're bigger than the issues," says Jim. "But a lot of times we have to be creative in how we talk about the issues," she says. "We

Donna continues, "Be sensitive to each other's needs.

"Somehow," she adds, "we tend to think that if we marry someone, we know all there is to know about that person. But that's boring. It's nicer to see that other person as a mystery, a beautiful gift covered with wrap and wrap and wrap, and more wrap."

The worst advice they can give a young couple today, say both Fitches, is to get married and settle down.

Have a honeymoon each year, they say —

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Donna Fitch

need to learn to be more creative in how conflict is handled. It's how we handle these issues that can be life-giving and healthful."

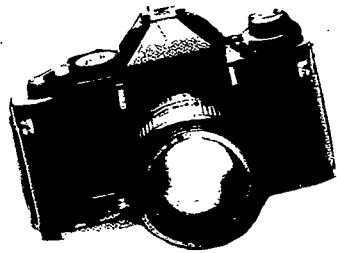
What advice do they have for couples starting out this wedding season? Communication seems to be the key.

"You need to learn to allow for differences," says Jim.

do nice things. "What's wrong with being close, holding hands in the grocery store? We did it when we dated," says Donna.

Couples are not islands. Relationships take the support of other people, says Jim.

"We must be careful the attitudes of the world don't take us over," Donna concludes. "Truthfully, that's not what we're called to"



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