

Newlyweds must learn how to talk

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

"Marriage is often thought of as one word, but marriage is a sentence."

So quipped James Gillette, who with his wife, Lita, coordinates marriage preparation for Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish in Brockport. And as Gillette and others involved in the marriage-preparation process note, that sentence begins with the phrase, "I pledge to listen ..."

"Most of the marriages fail because (the husband and wife) really don't know how to communicate with each other," remarked Shari Fischer, regional coordinator of diocesan Marriage Preparation and Family Ministry at the Catholic Family Center.

Fischer and other experts noted that in marriage-preparation sessions, today's couples are often interested in learning how to communicate with one another more effectively. Indeed, the diocesan manual on marriage preparation — *When Families Marry* contains an entire section devoted solely to communication.

"Communication touches on everything," said Elaine Montgomery, who with her husband is coordinator for marriage preparation at Assumption Church in Fairport. Montgomery stressed that couples need to agree on such issues as how they'll spend their income and how they'll raise their children.

On the other hand, when it comes to such areas as opinions and some leisure-time pursuits, marriage-preparation experts said couples must learn that it's OK to disagree.

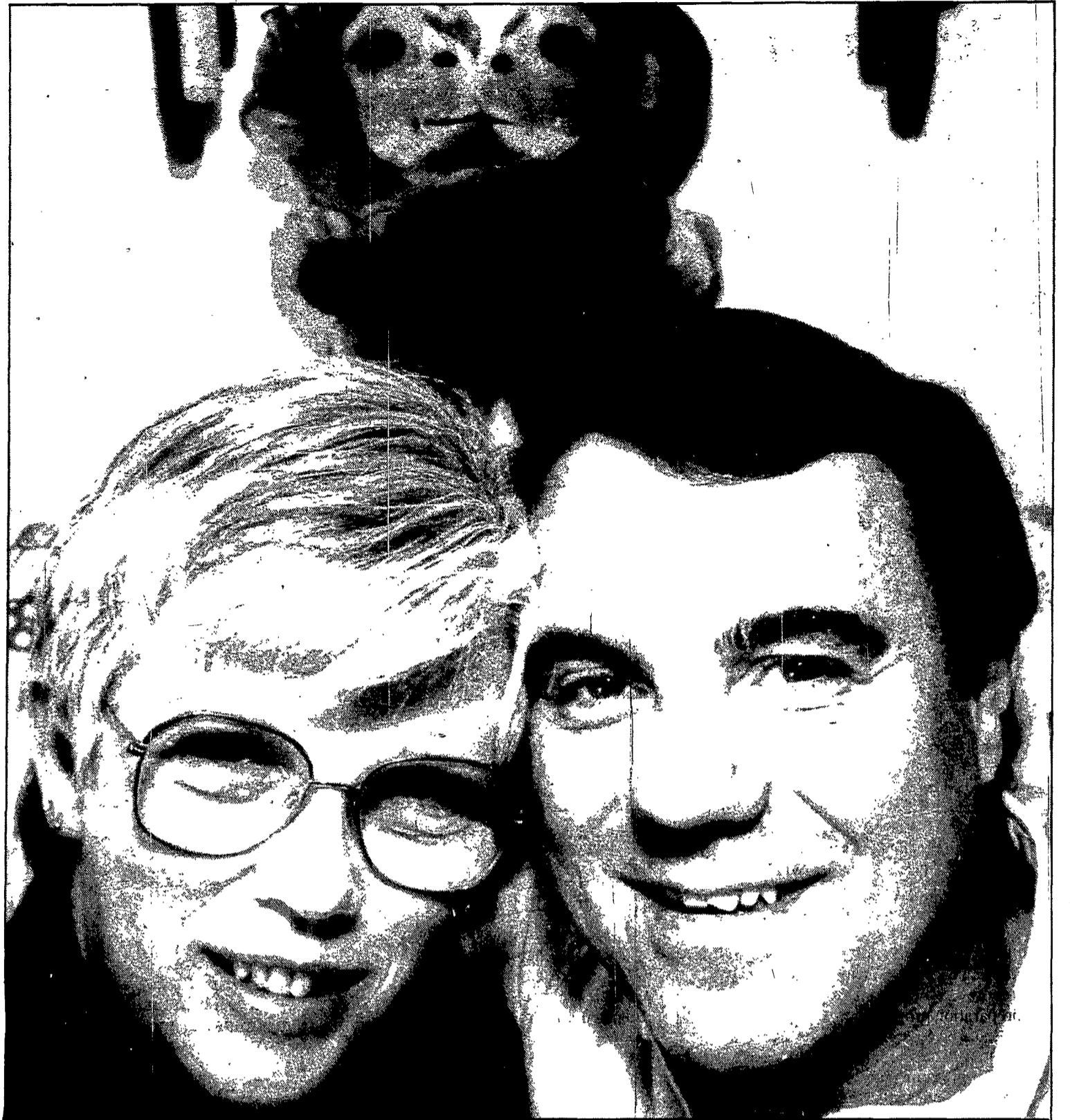
Whether mates agree or disagree is not as important as whether they let each other know how they feel. Marriage-preparation experts emphasized that silence may be golden in some contexts, it can be lethal between husband and wife.

Montgomery noted that communication is not the same as conversation. "You can talk volumes about events, the news of the day," she said. "(But) communication is more personal."

To illustrate her contention, Montgomery said that married people need to continually talk about their individual hopes and fears, rather than bottling them up and leaving them on an emotional shelf.

For instance, Montgomery tells young couples that when her introverted husband used to become moody and withdrawn, she assumed that his behavior was caused by something she had done. Only when he began to tell her that he had problems on the job did she realize she wasn't to blame for his moods.

"The fact is, you can assume a lot when you don't communicate," she said.



Shari Fischer, regional coordinator of diocesan Marriage Preparation and Family Ministry, and her husband, Denny, jokingly remark that family members can determine the prevailing climate of their marriage on a given day by checking whether their toy monkeys (top) are hugging or apart.

Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

One thing young couples no longer assume in today's society is that their marriage will succeed, marriage-preparation experts noted.

Engaged couples are well-aware that many contemporary marriages fail, and they want to learn to avoid the mistakes that have pushed other marriages into divorce, Montgomery commented.

"(Couples) are coming in with a real, sincere desire to make this work because they know the statistics, and they don't want to become one of them," she said.

To join the percentage of marriages that work, Fischer stressed, engaged people

must know each other's family traits and characteristics — which explains the marriage preparation manual's title *When Families Marry*.

"We're not really trained for marriage except from what's around us," Fischer remarked, commenting that "what's around us" when we're growing up is our family.

The manual's discussion sections give weight to Fischer's contentions. Each section contains sub-chapters on family attitudes on such issues as spending money, resolving conflicts and expressing sexuality.

To illustrate the need for engaged men and women to explore each other's family backgrounds, Fischer pointed out that young couples aglow with love may overlook the profound effect their differing ethnic backgrounds can have on their marriages. One such effect can be produced by the conflicting degrees of importance ethnic groups attach to the celebration of certain holidays, she said, noting that engaged couples need to discuss how they will share the holidays with their in-laws.

Another trait influenced by couples' family backgrounds is their attitude toward

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