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THE LOVE DOCTOR ®

Listening, learning and making love work

Couples at marriage retreat strengthen their connection

By TERRI ORBUCH
THE LOVE DOCTOR

Rick Sykes lost his job and was out of work for several months. His wife, Christine, nearly died during emergency surgery to remove a uterine fibroid tumor.

They have six kids, and while life has often pulled them in different directions, it hasn't torn apart their marriage. The Bloomfield Hills couple -- Detroit Denby High School sweethearts -- are to celebrate their 22nd wedding anniversary in November.

"Surprisingly, these hardships just brought us closer together," says Rick Sykes, a 41-year-old contractor for THAW, The Heat and Warmth Fund. "They make you appreciate what you have and don't want to lose."

The Sykeses recently took part in an "All About Us Weekend Retreat" at the Hyatt Regency Dearborn along with about 10 other couples looking to improve their marriages.

Organized by the Marriage Resource Center of Wayne County (www.mimarrriage.org), the two-day retreats are non faith-based, and include one night's hotel stay and a Saturday breakfast/lunch.

"At first I was hesitant," Sykes said. "But I learned a lot this weekend, especially how to listen and really understand what my wife is saying."

Couples held hands, smiled and listened to the retreat facilitators -- LaShun Franklin, a licensed psychologist, and her husband Ron Franklin, a certified marriage therapist -- who have been married for 18 years.

"One of the important ways to enrich your relationship is to have fun together," LaShun Franklin told the group. "You just need to agree on what you want to do for fun. So, what do you guys do for fun when money is tight?"

"We like to go to poetry readings together," said Deborah Duncan, 56, of Detroit. She and her husband, Alan, 53, have been married for five years and said they signed up for the retreat to learn new ways to communicate.

The suggestions for couple fun came easily after that: going to cider mills, auctions, garage sales; playing laser tag, paintball, strip poker, working out, going to drive-ins or the spa, or spending a day together shopping.

The focus was on education rather than therapy and was designed to help partners say what they need to say, strengthening their connection with each other.

"We teach couples new ways to talk without fighting, communicate their expectations, have fun and forgive," Ron Franklin said.

"The best thing I learned was how to verbalize my feelings so she can understand me," said Alan Duncan. "You know, it isn't easy to say how I'm feeling. I now have some tools to do so."

Rick Sykes said the retreat led to a breakthrough for him.

"I now recognize that we need to do fun things together," he said. "When LaShun asked the group what we like to do for fun, the look on my wife's face was very telling."

His wife grew teary-eyed as he continued: "I need to compromise more in the future. I know my wife loves shopping, so I will commit to going shopping with her, at least once a month."

Dr. Terri Orbuch is a marriage and family therapist, Oakland University professor and research professor at the University of Michigan. She is the author of "5 Simple Steps to Take Your Marriage from Good to Great," on sale Oct. 27 (Random House, \$26). E-mail her at torbuch@freepress.com.

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Retreat info

The next "All About Us Weekend Retreat" is 6 p.m. Nov. 13-

3 p.m. Nov. 14 in Dearborn. For more: www.mimichigan.org or 313-278-4400. There is a \$20 registration fee; however, couples get a \$20 gift card if they complete the retreat.
