

HEART TO HEART

Couples Find Enrichment and Support for Their Partnerships by Participating in Retreats

By **JULIE PFITZINGER**, *Special to the Star Tribune, Minneapolis - St. Paul, MN, Sunday, February 20, 2011*

WAYS TO RECONNECT

- Evaluate who you are as an individual and as a couple. Talk to your partner about how and why you both believe communication between the two of you has changed.
- Make time to spend together as a couple as often as possible.
- Consider what your partner and you individually bring to the relationship.
- Write a letter to your partner about your feelings regarding the relationship — not an e-mail — and mail it.

David Woolley and Cyndie DeRidder had been in a long-distance relationship for a couple of years when DeRidder moved to Minneapolis in 2004. The couple soon found themselves struggling and decided to separate, although they still weren't convinced about their decision.

At a very tenuous point in their relationship, they attended a Heart to Heart couples enrichment weekend at Koinonia Retreat Center in Annandale, Minn. The deeply personal stories shared by the lead couples had a significant impact.

"It was really amazing how open the presenting couples were about their own relationships," said Woolley. "They really laid themselves bare. Their experiences opened the door for us to look into ourselves and our relationship." The couple married a year ago.

Heart to Heart, a nondenominational program for opposite-sex and same-sex couples, married or not, was founded in 1994 by three local couples, including Eric and Laurel Lein of St. Paul.

The Leins, together for 41 years and married since their early 20s, participated in a Marriage Encounter group in 1990 and found it so beneficial that they wanted to start a similar program to also welcome gay and lesbian couples.

"We wanted to offer this kind of program to a community that was not represented," said Laurel. "I think one of the best things about our weekends is that we respect people from many different backgrounds."

Unity Church-Unitarian in St. Paul serves as a sponsor for Heart to Heart; the program guidebook is similar to one used by Marriage Encounter, but with a diminished focus on the religious message.

Heart to Heart weekends are offered twice a year and include presentations on topics such as finances, parenting, intimacy, relationship crises and communication.

SPOKEN FROM THE HEART

"As presenting couples, we take turns telling the group about our own difficulties," said Sue Harrington of Edina, who has been a leader with her husband, Terry Miller, for nine years. "We are not offering disillusionment, but rather tools for couples to find their own way together."

There are no group sharing sessions; the structure of the Friday-Sunday event revolves around presentations by the leaders and then time for individual couples to communicate privately, sharing their thoughts in conversation and journaling activities.

"We can definitely see a lot of emotions in the couples, but we never know what is causing their pain because we don't ask," said Laurel. "One of our experiences might have just touched a nerve for them."

The retreat leaders, all volunteers, are quick to point out that Heart to Heart weekends are not intended to serve as a replacement for couples therapy, although they do occasionally have couples attend who have been referred by a therapist.

"I think people are hungry to spend time together as a couple, and these weekends offer that chance to be face-to-face," said Nancy Gossard, who with partner Susan Hoffman has been serving as a lead couple for the past year.

The pair, who live in Minneapolis, have received positive feedback from other same-sex couples at the retreats for their willingness to share the story of their own relationship, which began 29 years ago.

"As Nancy is fond of saying, it is great to have an opportunity to have your relationship validated by others," said Hoffman.

After the Heart to Heart retreats, participating couples are encouraged to form small groups and continue to meet on a regular basis, and many do.

"I know that Laurel and I wouldn't be a couple today if we hadn't followed up with an ongoing group," Eric Lein said. "Our story has had many ups and downs, but that is what it is like to be in a relationship."

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