

Tuesday, February 9, 2010

LIVING RELATIONSHIPS

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where South Jersey moms meet



ThinkStock

Cupid? Stupid!

At least one South Jersey mom would rather get flowers from her husband on a Nothing Day, then on Feb. 14.

How about you?

South Jersey moms weigh in Valentine's Day at SouthJersey.MomsLikeMe.com: http://southjersey.momslikeme.com/members/JournalActions.aspx?g=437479&m=10154584&source=stream_home

You can add your own thoughts there, too, as well as browse our calendar of events, catch up on the latest chat, browse photo galleries and vote in our latest poll.

HOT TOPIC



In the mood for a little romance?

The Philadelphia theater company 1812 Productions stages "Let's Pretend We're Married" in a special return engagement through Sunday.

Created and starring Tony Braithwaite and Jennifer Childs, the show is presented at the Prince Music Theatre, 1412 Chestnut St.

For tickets (\$25-\$35) or more info, visit www.1812productions.org.

PET OF THE WEEK



Marriage

in the age of distraction



NAME/Courier-Post Staff

Rick and Jennifer Coraggio are happily married for 16 years and kept their promise to have a large family.

By **LU HANESSIAN**
For the Courier-Post

I once knew a woman who left her husband in the middle of dinner. One minute, she was standing over a hot stove, sauteing scallops and onions, and the next she was backing out of the driveway in a final fit of exasperation.

Five years earlier, on a scuba-diving trip in the Caribbean, the same couple had a heated pantomime argument — underwater — when neither of them could locate their group or the boat.

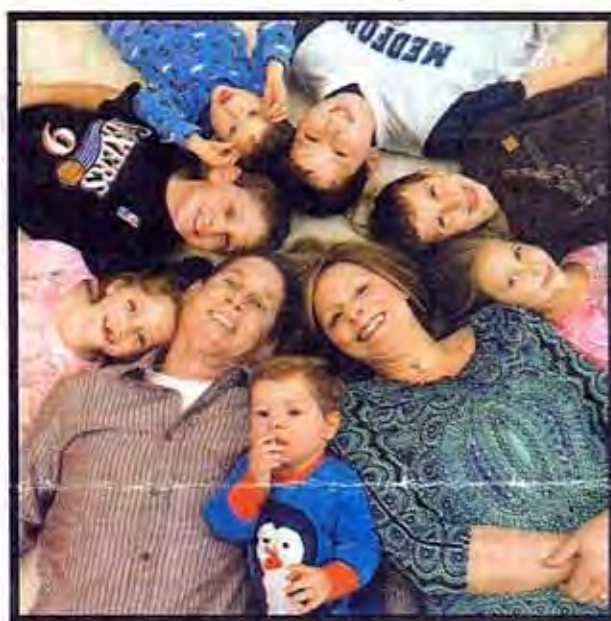
Marriage is complicated.

Not only do we bring our expectations, old stories, family scripts and fantasies to the altar, but we bring our cell phones, our agendas (both literal and figurative), and all

the pressures of daily life that can press on a couple like a giant thumb.

There is no shortage of experts expounding on how to find love or fix it in 10 easy steps. But, what about how to sustain the "good thing" you've already got, especially in these times of uncertainty and flux? If the gerbil was on the treadmill a few years ago, the little guy is spinning now while holding onto the wheel by his tail. Where does love fit into this tailspin — and could it be just the antidote we need to mitigate our stress and anxiety in this age of distraction?

Jennifer and Rick Coraggio say that, not only is their love the one unchanging element in their busy, often chaotic lives, but it's the force that grounds them.



CHRIS LaCHALL/Courier-Post

More the merrier: Rick and Jennifer Coraggio relax at home surrounded (clockwise from bottom) by Hudson, 1; Savanna, 6; Hunter, 9; Tanner, 3; Jake, 12; Max, 8, and Sophia, 5.

How do you stay connected when your attention is drawn everywhere else?

Jennifer, 40, and Rick, 42, of Medford, had one expectation when they married 16 years ago: to have a big family.

"I just didn't think we'd have this big a family!" laughs Jennifer. She and Rick are the proud parents of a 12, 9, 8, 6, 5, 3 and 1 year-old. Yes, seven children.

How does a mother (working part-time as a family physician) and a father (working full-time in human resources at UPS), run a household — manage diaper changes to soccer games — and still remember that they are also husband and wife?

According to Cherry Hill couples and sex therapist Dr. Stephen Betchen, author of the much-anticipated book "Magnetic Partners: Discovering the Hidden Conflict

IF YOU GO

■ Dr. Stephen Betchen, DSW, Cherry Hill Counseling Center, 1916 Rt. 70 East, Suite 2, Cherry Hill. Author of 'Magnetic Partners' (Free Press, 2010); 'Intimate Partners, Elusive Mates' (Routledge, 2005); 'Real-Life Relationships' (Xlibris, 2003). (856) 751-9787.

■ Carolynn Aristone, MSW, LCSW, 12 Barclay Pavilion East, Cherry Hill. (856) 577-5515 or www.livefullycounseling.com

that Has Drawn Each of You Together and Pulled You Apart" (Free Press, May 2010). "They're a team. When you keep that team

Fight the weapons of mass distraction

At a red light, I notice a woman in the next lane who is apparently having a board meeting in her car, by herself, with about 12 yellow stickie notes stuck all over her dashboard, a phone piece attached to her ear, a pen in her hand and a lap top perched on the seat beside her.

When we didn't have cells and laptops, we drove to work and got things done there. If people weren't available for a meeting, we rescheduled. Are we more productive now?

Collectively, sure. But what about personally? Some of the busiest people I know are also the ones who feel they get very little done. Others feel like they have to fill every waking moment with work just



Lu Hanessian Driving Lessons

to get or stay ahead. And some people feel squeezed by the clock, resentful that there's never enough time to do what they need to do.

What happened to life? Oh, that? It's been outsourced. Someone else is living it for us.

I watch Super Business Multitasking Driver in the next lane, and she looks very serious. Who knows? Maybe she's closing a big deal and can't wait for a landline and a swivel chair. Maybe she works on the road and has no office. Maybe she forgot that talk-

ing on a cell while driving — even one attached to your head — is illegal. I don't think this is about work or success or reaching for any brass ring.

We are painfully disconnected from our real needs. Our need for joy, for belonging, for restoration, for authentic connection — and not just the kind that affords us the chance to bounce signals off of satellites. We live in a chronic state of distraction, here but not there, always thinking of the next thing, or the wrong thing while we're doing something else.

Last week, a sleep-deprived truck driver slammed into a woman's disabled car on the New York State thruway and killed her. He was watching

an adult movie on his laptop. She left behind two little boys.

Our collective and individual "disconnect" is of concern not only because we place ourselves and others at risk with our inattention, but because it pervades our relationships.

Cut to the 6-year-old walking across the parking lot with his hand-held gaming device. Cars are going and coming. A fire truck even zooms by less than a hundred yards away. And he doesn't look up once. Not to check the road before crossing or to notice the world around him. He is so engrossed in his own, his senses are impervious to incoming stimuli.

This is not a toy to keep him quiet. It's a way of

learning how to zone out.

The more our kids practice this absentee living while in the presence of loved ones, the more they develop the neural circuitry of disconnection. When does this little boy learn to look up and see a car coming? When might he look up and notice an elderly man who might need a hand crossing? When would he plug back into reality and recognize that life is not actually about accumulating points or starting a new game?

Distractions are here to stay. We're not going to see less, but exponentially more of them, as technology blows our minds with wilder and more convenient gizmos to make life faster, easier, and more effi-

cient.

But, there will never be a genius apparatus that restores our sense of purpose, joy and balance. One way to rewire our gray one is to put down our weapons of mass distraction for certain black-out periods of the week or weekend, and talk with our kids about the things they love, listen to their stories, tell them ours, whip up some homemade laughter, and play.

Lu Hanessian is the author of 'Let the Baby Drive' (St. Martin's Press, 2004), former NBC anchor and host of Make Room for Baby on Discovery Health Channel, a parent educator, and the founder of WYSH Wear Your Spirit for Humanity. www.wearyourspirit.com. Reach her at WYSH or at www.letthebabydrive.com and http://www.keeping-thelighton.net

Marriage/How couples can keep the love alive in a crazy world

Continued from Page 1D

concept in your mind, you can empathize with one another; you protect your best player. A lot of couples forget that team concept."

Laughing matters

If there's one thing that tends to take a backseat in times of stress, it's humor, and yet, for the Corragio's, it's the fuel that maintains perspective.

"We laugh constantly," says Jennifer. "It's impossible to be stressed out when you're laughing. And it bonds us. Rick will call me in the middle of the day to tell me something funny I missed. That makes all the difference in the world at work. And then I tell my patient about the funny thing my 3-year-old did, and it's contagious."

Rick recalls, "One time, I got out the video camera when our oldest was 3. He comes down and he has nail polish all over his nails and he did a fantastic job! I called Jen, and we laughed so hard."

Laughter is a defenses-down experience — you can't laugh with your back up.

No scorecards

"We're not afraid to say what's on our minds. We don't bottle things up," says Rick. "We argue sometimes and then it's over with. We both have so much responsibility. But we know we need each other. There is no scorecard."

But, when anger accumulates and marinates, a marriage can accrue deep resentment and a bitter record of wrongs.

"Some people keep a kind of checks and balances," explains Dr. Betchen. "It's their so-called ledger. It's a product of their own upbringing. For example, if they saw one parent overworking or saw some imbalance or if they perceived things were unfair to them, they might develop this exaggerated ledger and become very sensitive about it. Couples have to commit enough to get through the hard times, and make a commitment to the relationship instead of the ledger."

When blame is part of a marriage dynamic, couples already are wearing their suits of armor. Ironically, they still want love and validation from each other. Dr. Betchen says what happens is that "when you've got extra stress, you end up with two drowning victims and no lifeguard. Two people who are both feeling victimized at the same time, and nobody can be supportive or empathic."

So, what stops Jennifer from blaming Rick for her fatigue or for those times when she might be carrying a heavier load of responsibility on a particular day?

"We don't want to let each other down. We are both at capacity. We don't want to dump on the other person. I want to show him my best side."

"I have learned that you don't want to sweat the small stuff. If he doesn't feel like unloading the dishwasher, then he can do it when he wants to. Sometimes, I just can't stand to go over that science chapter and he knows it."

Managing emotions

When couples take each other's reactions personally, marriages can buckle under the weight of accumulated disappointment. Partners may have their own way of parenting that is slightly different from the other, but may not feel the urge to correct each other's approach, or criticize each other's reaction to a situation.

"I never, ever doubt that he's got my back," says Jennifer.

Rick adds, "We don't have issues with each other's reactions. If she handles something a certain way with the kids, I respect it."

"(Successful couples) don't have a competitive marriage," notes Dr. Betchen. "Nobody's the power broker here. It devalues our partner when we vie for power. It affects a partner's self-esteem over time. Both partners need to feel that they're bringing something to the table. In a competitive marriage, neither gets that."

What about the clutter? "Our house used to be so perfectly spic and span. But, now there's toys all over. That's OK. We love to see that. What's unacceptable chaos is when people are being unkind or unfair to each other. We're constantly putting out little fires. We have

such a structure, and things run pretty smoothly here."

When things don't run as smoothly, couples may have different philosophies, whether it's about clutter or laundry or how money is spent.

Dr. Betchen says they might use these as "distractions to really stress themselves out, and use it as an opportunity to not have to commit any further."

After years of stress-inducing distractions, couples can become accustomed to the emotional disconnect even if they feel miserable. How can partners maintain their initial attraction, in spite of life's pressures?

"It's been rough at times, but we don't quit on each other. Maybe there are things that we do that prevent us from getting to the point where we say we're done. I guess one thing is that I watch her with the kids sometimes and think about how calm, cool and collected she is, and I respect her so much."

Adds Dr. Betchen, "I always say to people, 'Keep your partner feeling as good about themselves as possi-

ble.' It raises your own self-esteem. After all, you had the good judgment to choose that person."

Unspoken gratitude

Carolynn Aristone, a South Jersey holistic social worker who brings her integrative training in Gestalt, yoga and stress reduction to her therapy, has noticed that more and more couples are feeling disconnected.

"People can be more focused on their careers, caregiving, and their to-do lists than each other. Couples often come home from work and go right into task mode."

"We live in a society that really values production. When a couple comes in to see me, I try to get them to root themselves in their own breath. Look at each other. Take 30 seconds to hold hands. That can bring up a lot of anxiety, giggling, and discomfort. In part, because they're not taking time to just be. Being and looking at each other can be extraordinarily intimate."

Jennifer says, "We definitely don't stop and look into each other's eyes as much as we could, but I think it's

the holding hands and the unspoken gratitude that connects us."

Choosing each other

Most of us have heard the advice to make time for each other by setting a "date night." But, for many couples, especially in this economic climate, a date night just isn't realistic.

"Well, it's kind of hard to call the 15-year-old girl down the street to watch seven kids!" laughs Jennifer. "We're not ultra mushy and leave sticky notes. But, when the kids are asleep, that's our time. I do think sometimes we are like two ships passing in the night, but behind it all is absolute trust and respect."

Aristone says it's all about being the partner you want to be with.

"When couples choose to marry or make a long-term commitment, that commitment replays itself each and every day. By waking up together each day, these partners are saying I choose you on this day and again on this day and again on this day."

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From Paris With Love (R) 12:00 2:10 4:30 7:00 10:10	The Book of Eli (R) 1:30 4:20 7:10 10:00
Dear John (PG-13) 1:00 4:20 7:30 9:45	The Lovely Bones (PG-13) 1:15 4:15 7:15 10:25
Edge of Darkness (R) 1:45 4:35 7:25 10:15	Daybreakers (R) 3:05 10:35
When in Rome (PG-13) 1:00 3:20 5:40 8:00 10:20	Shrek Forever After (PG-13) 3:55 10:30
Tenacious D (PG-13) 12:58 7:00	It's Complicated (R) 1:15 4:15 7:40 10:30
The Blind Side (PG-13) 1:10 4:10 7:15	Arlo and the Jurassics: The Sequel (PG) 12:45 3:05 5:25 7:45 9:55
Tooth Fairy (PG) 1:40 4:25 6:55 9:25	Juno (PG-13) 12:45 4:15 7:45
Extraordinary Measures (PG) 2:10 4:45	Avatar (PG-13) 12:45 3:05 5:25 7:45 9:55
Legion (R) 2:00 4:30 7:00 10:00	Avatar (PG-13) 12:45 3:05 5:25 7:45 9:55

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