

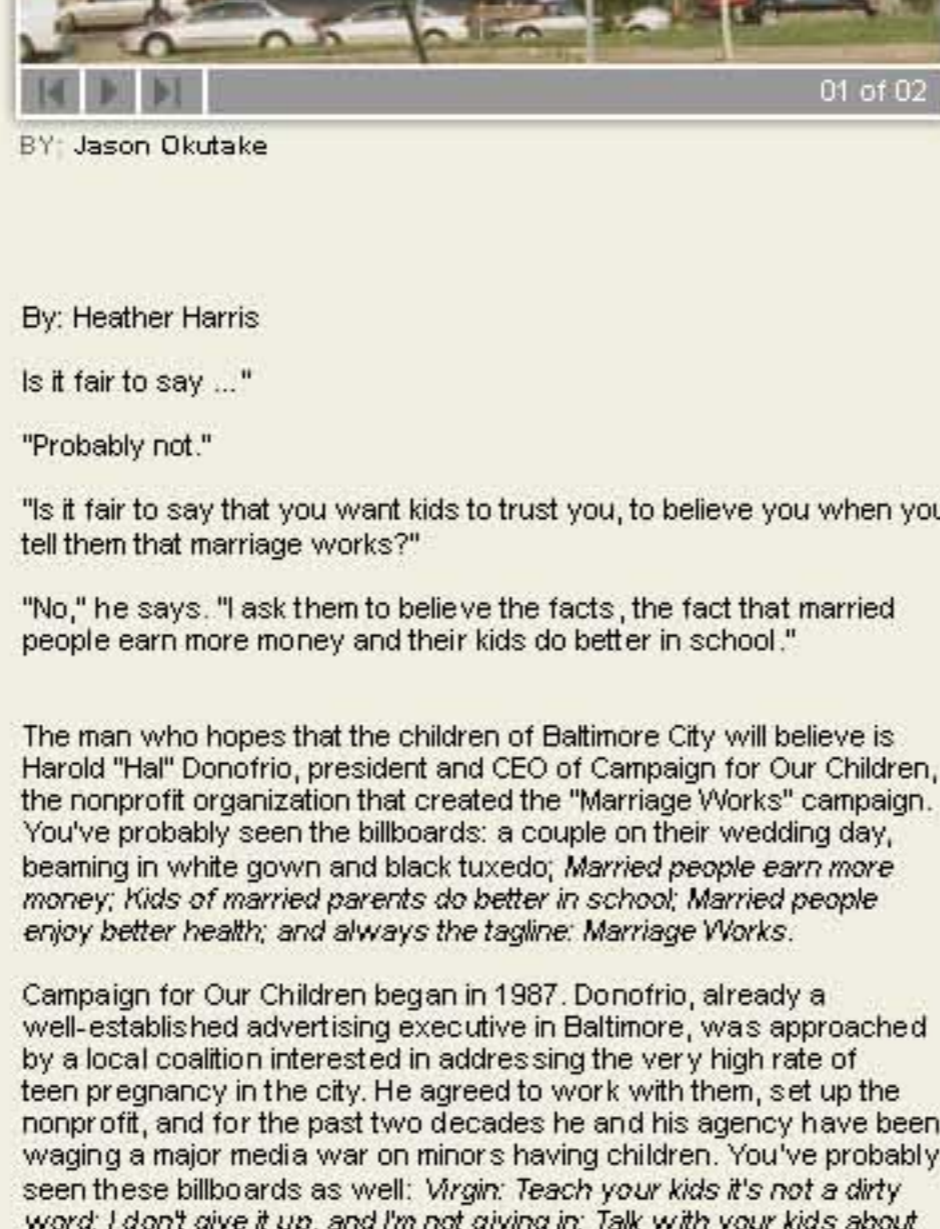
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**MARRIAGE WORKS. OR DOES IT?**

A pro-marriage campaign pops a lot of questions but provides few answers

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BY: Jason Okutake

By: Heather Harris

Is it fair to say ..."

"Probably not."

"Is it fair to say that you want kids to trust you, to believe you when you tell them that marriage works?"

"No," he says. "I ask them to believe the facts, the fact that married people earn more money and their kids do better in school."

The man who hopes that the children of Baltimore City will believe is Harold "Hal" Donofrio, president and CEO of Campaign for Our Children, the nonprofit organization that created the "Marriage Works" campaign. You've probably seen the billboards: a couple on their wedding day, beaming in white gown and black tuxedo; *Married people earn more money; Kids of married parents do better in school; Married people enjoy better health; and always the tagline: Marriage Works.*

Campaign for Our Children began in 1987. Donofrio, already a well-established advertising executive in Baltimore, was approached by a local coalition interested in addressing the very high rate of teen pregnancy in the city. He agreed to work with them, set up the nonprofit, and for the past two decades he and his agency have been waging a major media war on minors having children. You've probably seen these billboards as well: *Virgin: Teach your kids it's not a dirty word. I don't give it up, and I'm not giving in; Talk with your kids about sex. Everyone else is.*

The "Marriage Works" campaign, according to Donofrio, was the logical next step in the effort to reduce births to unmarried teen mothers. "I am a practical man, a business man. I have an economic axe to grind. We could not continue to support the epidemic [teen pregnancy and out-of-wedlock birth] situation we were seeing in 1987 in Baltimore," he says. "If we were in Hitler's Germany, we would sterilize a generation and focus education on very young children to break the cycle. But we're not. We're more civilized than that."

"It was a personal decision to move on to marriage," says Donofrio, who believes that people who expect to marry will use better judgment regarding their sexual activity as teens. "Prevention over cure," he adds, referring to his goal of preventing out-of-wedlock births instead of "curing" families with welfare dollars after the crisis has occurred. Donofrio's marriage-focused directive is actually part of a larger national trend. The "Marriage Works" campaign and other public service initiatives like it have become increasingly common, particularly in low-income communities. The question is: Is it reasonable to suggest marriage as the solution to social and economic problems? And if it is, are media campaigns the way to do it?

Marriage-promotion initiatives had their genesis in the welfare reform efforts of the 104th Congress in 1996. The act, referred to as the "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996," declared marriage a major weapon in the war on poverty. It states, "The Congress makes the following findings: (1) Marriage is the foundation of a successful society. (2) Marriage is an essential institution of a successful society which promotes the interests of children."

In section 912 of this legislation, money is allotted to "provide abstinence education, and at the option of the State, where appropriate, mentoring, counseling, and adult supervision to promote abstinence from sexual activity, with a focus on those groups which are most likely to bear children out-of-wedlock." According to the legislation, the education will teach that "abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage [is] the expected standard for all school age children," and "sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects." In 2003, these initiatives were revisited by the Congress and reaffirmed, cementing the political and financial support of marriage as the ideal family structure.

Not surprisingly, this shift in welfare policy has been accompanied by significant debate and disagreement. According to a 2002 report called *Let Them Eat Wedding Rings*, by Dorian Sobot and Marshall Miller of the Alternatives to Marriage Project, "The Heritage Foundation recommends spending at least ten percent of federal welfare funds (about \$1.5 billion per year) to promote marriage," including media advertising campaigns. The report goes on to say, "The diversion of funds from poverty-fighting programs (such as job training or food stamps) into pro-marriage media campaigns and incentives eclipses the real needs of Americans in poverty."

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Sobot-Miller paper is its analysis of other industrialized countries and the "marriage-poverty link." The report states, "The country-to-country comparisons ... show how little correlation there is between marriage rates and child poverty, and between births to unmarried parents and child poverty." Sweden's child poverty rate is seven times lower than the rate in the U.S., despite the fact that the majority of babies there are born to unmarried parents.

"Despite [the] high rate of marriage (and remarriage) [in the U.S.], our percentage of children in poverty is the second highest of the 21 countries considered. It is four to six times higher than the countries with the lowest marriage rates." All the studies that support and dispute Congress' legislation look at correlations, not causes. Correlations are things that happen together, causes are things that make other things happen. "Here's how you could easily establish cause," says Andrew Cherlin, a sociologist and author at Johns Hopkins University and a member of the Council on Contemporary Families, regarding the difficulty in determining marriage's benefits. "Take a random sample in the U.S. and assign half of them to marry and prohibit the other half from marrying, and then study them. But since you can't do that, it's very hard to say."

Stephanie Coontz, author of *Marriage, A History: How Love Conquered Marriage* and this issue's guest editor, tends to agree. "People are thinking of a very simplistic solution that rushes people into marriages. When we can get people into good marriages, that's a reasonable thing and a good benefit, but marriage is no one-size-fits-all solution to the challenges of poverty or rearing healthy children."

Proponents of the government's marriage initiatives agree that billboards are not going to fix the problems of poverty and broken families; they also agree that more research is important.

"People have unreasonable expectations for a media campaign," says Bronwyn Mayden, a social worker and former executive director at Campaign for Our Children. "Our goal is to get a conversation going in the community. We're trying to move an entire system. I view our message as tilling the field, getting it ready to plant."

Joseph Jones, founder, president and CEO of Baltimore's Center for Fathers, Family, and Workforce Development, and a Campaign for Our Children board member, believes the media campaign is useful in helping him encourage his clients to take care of themselves and their families. Jones himself grew up in a broken home and spent seventeen years on the streets of Baltimore addicted to drugs. He fathered one child out-of-wedlock before getting off drugs and into a career working with the at-risk residents of Baltimore City.

On May 5, 2004, Jones testified before the Senate subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy. He told the senators that four factors contribute to a healthy marriage: "Work that provides you with a sense of pride and purpose; freedom from the demons of alcohol and drugs; ability to communicate and respect your partner; and a community that values marriage."

Two years later, he continues to work toward the public consensus. "The community needs to buy in, in order for individual stories to change," he says. "We're trying to keep the system out, to teach two young people to learn to stick together. But," he adds candidly, "the research outcomes will not be known for five years."

According to Diann Dawson, director of the Office of Regional Operations at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, this situation is typical as social policies are developed. "You don't always wait for the final results to begin to implement a public policy," she says. "Every major social policy change comes with tensions and disagreements. We need more research, but the correlations are pretty persuasive. And it would be foolish not to recognize the power of the media to change behavior."

The battles over policy, funding, research, and intervention will no doubt go on for many years, but what is going on in the communities, and in the families, that are the focus of these healthy marriage initiatives? Amber and Paul are in the Baltimore Building Strong Families program, a program that provides relationship-skills training and practical services to encourage couples to commit to each other and to their children. Paul is 22 and Amber is 23; they have three boys between them, ages 2, 1, and 1 month old. The two older boys are from Paul's previous relationship.

A staff person from Baltimore Building Strong Families saw them walking down the streets of Baltimore City. Amber was pregnant. The staff person pulled over, jumped out of his car, and went over to talk to them about the program. "You don't do that in the hood," Paul laughs. "But that was a blessing."

Amber and Paul are planning to move to Atlanta in this month. They're working on lining up good jobs and getting ready for a fresh start.

"We always talk about getting married," Paul says. "We talk about when we're going to do it. But we wanted to be financially stable first—jobs, cars."

"Our grandparents were okay getting married and living with family," Amber says. "We want our own place. Right now we're living with his mother. We're tired of living with other people. If the kids mess the place up, I want it to be our place."

Regarding the obstacles to getting married, Paul says, "The jobs are harder to work out than the relationship. If you've got kids, you've got to have a job. That's your main responsibility. But I'm going to propose before the end of the year."

Both agree they never thought they'd get married to anyone. Amber says, "My friend just got married. She's 25. It's going good. But you can't say what will happen in the long run." Amber pauses. "We met, and I was like 'This is someone I could be with for the rest of my life. Why not try it? If it doesn't go right ...'" She shrugs.

"We always find a way to work situations out," Paul says. "[Baltimore Building Strong Families] is teaching us how to work it out [if the bad things happen]."

Amber agrees. "It helps us in the long run to know how to talk to each other. Instead of saying 'Get that,' like I was his mother, now I say 'Can you get that?'"

"Being married," Paul says, "is like you all are one person. You're looking out for each other, you're not going anywhere. I told her, 'I've got to see you every morning.'"

"My grandparents seemed to have a good marriage," Amber says. "I lived with them until they passed away. They looked out for each other. If one couldn't do it, the other one was there." She hesitates. "You get more respect married. If he got sick, and I went to the hospital, they might not tell me as much because I'm not the wife."

Amber and Paul look at the "Marriage Works" material and consider the information about increased health and earnings and success for the children. "How can you say married people live longer?" Amber asks. "Anybody could go today or tomorrow."

Angela, another Baltimore resident, is 25 years old. She got pregnant with her daughter after dating Frank for a few months. Three and a half years later, she and Frank are living together and committed to each other, but they have no plans to marry.

"When I got pregnant, there was pressure from family to get married," she says. "We felt then as we do now that it wasn't a necessary step to make our family work."

Angela had worked at daycare centers and as a nanny. She was comfortable around children but unprepared for how hard motherhood initially was. "I had postpartum depression, and I didn't know it. Frank got pushed to the side and had an affair. When my daughter was 8 months old, she and I moved out."

Angela and Frank did get back together. "It's something we're still working on," she says. "He's still there dealing with it, and I'm still there dealing with it. The affair wasn't my fault or my responsibility, but I understand why he did what he did. It made me take a look at what I was doing to my life. I wanted everything to be so perfect for my daughter, because she didn't ask to be here. I still don't know what's right for my daughter and Frank and me, but we'll keep trying until we figure it out. Marriage won't fix it."

Angela says that marriage always seems like the next step, "something you do when you hit a dull spot," she says. "If I ever get married, it will be us saying, 'No matter who he becomes, no matter who she becomes, we'll be together.' In theory, I want marriage for myself. Of course I want to be in a place where I feel that I can accept another person fully. But marriage won't provide something in a relationship that wasn't already there."

"Frank feels like we are already married, and I guess I feel the same way. But we're not because I can't make that commitment for a lifetime, and I don't think he can either. We're still learning how to communicate, it would mean more to me if he acknowledged how far we've come than if he proposed."

Angela thinks about the "Marriage Works" campaign. "[Politicians] haven't been able to do much about poverty and AIDS. So they're like, 'Let's try this.' Plus it has a nice religious spin. People like to believe in a fairy tale to get them through the day. Instead of addressing poverty, just get married and it will be okay. But it just presents a new set of problems. They should talk about what marriage is. 'Marriage Works' doesn't address all the underlying issues. There are too many issues to promote it as a safe haven. It's like 'Really? This is what you've gone to? You're trying to fix it all with this? Okay. Good luck.'"

Paul and Amber and Angela and Frank reflect a general shift in how we think about marriage in this country. "Fifty years ago," Cherlin says, "you got married very early and then did the other things to make yourself an adult. Now you do everything else first and marriage last. Marriage used to be the foundation of being an adult; now it's the capstone, the last brick in place. Both the wealthy and the not-so-wealthy have postponed marriage, but the wealthy have also postponed having kids; the low-income population has not. The model they see is to have their kids soon and get married much later, if ever."

Since there are many more questions than answers at this point about what this shift means, and careful, reasonable people are coming to dramatically different conclusions, the best course seems to be more research. Cherlin, a skeptic when it comes to marriage promotion, supports funding marriage-promotion studies.

"You randomly offer services to half of married couples who, say, come in for family planning advice. You work really hard to design a relationshipskills class in a way that makes a difference. Then you come back in a year or two and see if the couples are still married. That's expensive to do on a large scale, but I think it's worth doing."

Cherlin stops and thinks. "What I don't think is worth doing is billboards and advertising campaigns and school education programs. We don't know if marriage promotion works, but it is worth spending some money to find out."

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