**Research Indicates: Sponsor Couple Program is more effective than Engaged Encounter. (Dr. Mary Velasquez – 1994 plus 2009 update)**

A research study conducted by Dr. Mary Velasquez in the Department of Psychology at the University of Houston (1994) compared the effectiveness of the "in home" Sponsor Couple (SC) program to the Engaged Encounter (EE) weekend. Couples who had been married for more than one but less than five years, and who had completed either the SC program or an EE weekend prior to their marriage, were compared to couples who had been married the same length of time but did not participate in one of the programs. Since both SC and EE teach communication skills, it was hypothesized that couples who participated in these programs would have higher levels of trust and intimacy than couples in the Control group.

The results of the study indicate that couples who participated in an EE or a SC program, relative to a control group, had significantly higher levels of trust and intimacy. A somewhat surprising result was that the couples who had been through the Sponsor Couple program also had significantly higher levels of trust and intimacy than the Engaged Encounter couples. This indicates that while both SC and EE significantly improved the quality of the couples' interpersonal relationships, the SC program was even more effective than EE.

A possible explanation for the unexpected difference in scores between the EE and SC groups may be the leader-couple ratio. Although the EE presenting couples (teams) are carefully trained, and the SC program is less formal, the one-on-one atmosphere of the SC program may be more conducive to encouraging trust and openness. This may be comparable to the difference between the use of a personal tutor in contrast to the typical classroom situation: although the classroom teacher is more highly trained, the personal attention of the tutor and the one-on-one relationship is likely to yield better results.

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**On May 3, 2009, the same Dr. Mary Velasquez wrote the following:**

My husband Jerry and I have been sponsor couples for Fr. Ruhnke’s “For Better and For Ever” marriage preparation program since its inception. As an academic, researcher and clinician in clinical psychology, behavioral health and social work, I have spent my career conducting research on programs that impact the health and well-being of individuals and society. I value

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those programs that are theoretically sound yet adaptable to the “real world,” and the sponsor couple program fills the bill on both of those counts. Fr. Ruhnke has a strong background in family systems, counseling, education and theology, and he brings this experience to bear in his sponsor couple program. He also relies heavily on the experience of married couples, and through the years, he has refined his program with their help. As a result of Fr. Ruhnke’s deep commitment to listening and trusting the experience of both engaged and married couples, his program reflects a deep understanding of the complexities of contemporary marriage. For Better and For Ever is based on empirically sound principles and yet it can be delivered by lay couples with a minimum of formal training. The book provides specific instructions for implementing the sessions, yet it is flexible enough to be adapted to couples in a wide variety of situations. My experience has been that the married sponsor couples gain a great deal from the experience of participating in the program; in fact, I am certain that it benefits the sponsor couples as much as it does the engaged couples.

Several years ago my colleagues and I conducted a study in order to better understand the mechanisms and potential outcomes of For Better and For Ever. At the time, we compared it with the Engaged Encounter weekend program and with a group of married couples who had not attended a marriage preparation program. The couples in each of the three conditions had been married for a minimum of five years. We were not surprised to learn that couples who had participated in a marriage preparation program had statistically significant higher scores on measures of trust and intimacy than did those couples who had not participated in marriage preparation. Our findings further revealed that couples who had participated in For Better and For Ever scored yet significantly higher on the measures of trust and intimacy than did the couples who had attended Engaged Encounter. Since that time, For Better and For Ever has continued to evolve, and we are now seeing a new generation of couples benefit from the program. In fact, on a personal note, our son and his wife recently completed the program prior to their marriage. Our experience as a sponsor couple ~ using the For Better and For Ever program ~ has enriched my life, both personally and professionally.

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