

written by Anne-Marie Welsh  
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**T**hey are just so darned adorable. A former lineman for the football team at Gannon University, he swore he'd never date the kind of girl who went to a Catholic high school, participated in the National Honor Society. An honor student and graduate of Villa Maria Academy in Erie, she says the only rule her father emphasized when she went off to college was, "You won't touch a football player with a ten-foot pole!"

But a chance meeting on their second day at Gannon and the matchmaking efforts of a mutual friend led to friendship. After a few months someone asked them if they were dating.

"We kind of looked at each other

and I said 'yes,'" Andrew remembers. "I could see she was pretty happy about my answer."

They're getting married next October. They've reserved the church and put a deposit on a location for their reception. She has chosen her gown, selected her flowers and asked friends to be her bridesmaids. He has lined up his groomsmen and knows what kind of tux he'll be renting. But at the tender age of 23, they are well aware that their engagement is about much more than planning a wedding. Andrew Kohl and Jessica Fuhrman went on an Engagement Encounter and have truly embraced its theme:

a wedding is one day,  
a marriage is a

*Lifetime*

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getting married?

The church looks at the period of engagement as a time for discernment. In other words, it's a time during which couples need to really determine if they are in fact being called to spend their lives together.

"We encourage couples to enter into the marriage preparation process early on in their engagement rather than saving it as the last thing they have to do before they can get married," says Ann Badach, Family Ministries director for the Erie Diocese. "We've had pastors from other dioceses and other faiths send couples to our program. They understand it's designed to benefit the couples at a very important moment in their relationship."

**T**he Catholic Church is a teaching church," says Ann Badach, director of Family Ministries for the Diocese of Erie. "Yes couples are 'required' go through a formal marriage preparation experience. But the idea behind it is that the church wants to help couples understand the sacramental implications. What exactly are we promising to do here?"

Having evaluated the marriage preparation courses offered through the diocese in the year since she began her job, Badach has become a big advocate of Engagement Encounter.

"Engagement Encounter gives couples an entire weekend to explore many different dimensions of married life," she explains. "It gives them an opportunity to learn more about themselves as individuals, and then to bring that sense of self to their beloved. In their sharing and exchange of self-reflection with each other, the relationship can go nowhere but deeper."

Jessie and Andy went into the experience thinking it was not really necessary.

"We had taken a theology of marriage course together at Gannon before we were even engaged," says Jessie. "And we had examined a lot of the topics. But it was really nice to sort

of re-discuss the things we had already talked about. It gave us extra security to think, 'Okay, we're at the spot where we're supposed to be.'"

Not that they didn't pick up some new ideas as well.

"We did learn things," Jessie admits. "We had some tense moments just last night and I remembered the rules for arguing we had learned at Engagement Encounter. I suddenly had new tools to use – so we've already seen the benefits."

Andrew and Jessie believe it's important for people to understand how private the Engagement Encounter experience is.

"A lot of people in our age group think of Engagement Encounter as a big retreat where you sit around and hold hands and sing songs together," Jessie says. "They think you're going to have

to share your feelings with this big group, but that isn't the case at all. We spent the entire weekend with each other. It's very private."

Throughout an Engagement Encounter weekend, participants do come together to hear short – ten to fifteen minute – talks on various topics by two different married couples. Then they are sent off with a series of open-ended questions to be discussed privately.

Sometimes they are assigned to write their thoughts down before sharing; other times it's straight into discussion.

"The couples gave us really good examples from their own personal lives," says Andrew. "And they created some nice moments for us to really connect with each other during the weekend."

Jessica and Andrew found they enjoyed dialoguing about the sacrament of marriage itself. In fact, within about 15 minutes of Andrew's proposing to Jessica, the couple had promised each other that their wedding day would be about the sacrament.

"It was really nice to talk about that again because I had been getting overwhelmed with some of the planning details," Jessie confesses. "Andy was like, 'See, Jess, you're getting off track! I needed that. I needed for us to remind ourselves why we had made that promise.'"



ministry focus  
Calling married couples: Marriage preparation programs need you!



Ann Badach

According to Ann Badach, director of the Office of Family Ministries, one of the most frequent comments couples make on their Engagement Encounter evaluation forms is that they have been inspired by the married couples who spent the weekend as role models and mentors.

"The personal stories they share from their own experiences help engaged couples synthesize what it really means to be in a marriage," she says. "The programs are strong because of these volunteers."

Among them are Deacon Gene and Pat Miller of Penfield, who have been involved with Engagement Encounter for the Erie Diocese for three years – most recently as its coordinators.

"In spite of all the work and planning involved, we always look forward to working Engagement Encounter," says Deacon Gene. "I think it's being around all these couples who are in love. They are there because they're in love and they want to make their marriage last forever."

Pat agrees. "When they're introducing themselves on Friday night, you can practically see the stars in their eyes," she says. "And that's absolutely contagious."

Deacon Gene says he likes the hands-on aspect of the weekend. "They do most of the work themselves, we just keep them on task and focused," he observes. "But I really like getting to know these couples. Many times they come to us on a break and ask us how we dealt with this or that. By Sunday we're sad to say goodbye."

Another thing the couple took away from the weekend was the idea that they don't have to be in complete agreement on every topic.

"The true test of commitment comes when we begin to discover our differences, not only what we have in common," Badach says. "There are many big issues out there we don't even think to discuss. That's where a good marriage preparation program comes in."

"I know Jessie used to feel we had to agree on everything," Andrew points out. "But different things popped up all weekend and we discovered that as long as we have mutual respect for each other's viewpoints, there is room for differences of opinion"

Badach says Engagement Encounter also gives the

Engagement Encounter weekends are led by two married couples and a priest.

"Each time we do a weekend, it has a different feeling," says Pat. "There's always something different going on in our lives, so although we may give the same talk, we relate to it differently."

The Millers, who recently celebrated their 31st wedding anniversary, also enjoy having a weekend to focus on each other.

"Being an Engagement Encounter team member definitely gives you a chance to renew your own marriage," Pat says.

Couples interested in getting involved – most participate in only one Engagement Encounter a year – should contact Badach in the Family Ministries Office at 814.824.1265 or 800.374.3723. She's ready to answer couples' questions about marriage preparation ministry or help to prepare them to be on a team. The Millers are also available for questions at 814.768.7597.



Deacon Gene and Pat Miller, then and now.



"You can learn a definition, but it wasn't until after we got engaged that I began to know what this sacrament really is."



church a chance to remind couples that marriage is a vocation. "It's something we are called to and something we respond to," she observes. "It's dynamic. It's life-giving."

"I always tell people I find God in Andy," Jessie says. "When I met Andy I was in a very dark place in my faith. In fact, our first argument was over him telling me I had to fix my relationship with God. Then I knew this wasn't just friendship, this wasn't just dating. There was something spiritual going on here, too."

Jessie's many years of Catholic education are evident when she spouts off the definition of a sacrament as an outward sign instituted by Christ.

"You can learn a definition, but it wasn't until after we got engaged that I began to know

what this sacrament really is," she says. "I think a sacrament is something God gives us so we can know him better. I'm very thankful. I really think God gave me Andy so I can get to know God better. Now I really want this sacrament. And what better way to make it official," she asks, "than to promise to be sacrament to each other in God's presence? To me, that's what it's about."

As part of its commitment to the program, the Diocese of Erie has added a fourth Engagement Encounter to its 2006 schedule and is offering twenty partial scholarships on a first-come, first-served basis to help those who might find its \$220 cost prohibitive.

"Even though we try very hard to keep it reasonable, the cost still feels a little steep to some people," Badach says. "But let's put it in perspective: Consider the cost of the cake or the DJ for a wedding reception, which lasts a few hours. You do the math," she says. "What's more important to you, one day...or a lifetime?"