

Carl and Sherran Esh:

How Retrouvaille

helped heal



c o v e r s t o r y

by Tom Rademacher | Photos by Jonathan Tramontana

our marriage

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o the casual observer, they had a storybook marriage, the world by the tail. Behind closed doors, though, Carl and Sherran Esh were miserable.



H

e felt betrayed by an employer, and despaired over having to leave their grown children to move out of state. Her disillusionment surfaced far sooner, mere weeks after their honeymoon, when it became clear Carl wouldn't help much with meals, laundry or caring for their first apartment.

They attended two Marriage Encounter weekends and later marriage counseling. Although the marriage counseling helped, it wasn't enough to save their marriage.

"I realized how dishonest we were with ourselves and each other," says Sher. "We denied there were any real problems in our marriage that would cause the marriage to fail. Apparently, we were afraid of confronting the true issues."

Medical problems surfaced for Sher. A family schism developed when Carl felt cheated out of an inheritance. Eventually, their sacred vows were "being held together by small threads," Sher remembers.

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After 25 years together, Carl and Sher Esh did agree on one thing

regarding their troubled marriage. It would take a miracle to save it.

Enter "Retrouvaille," arguably a little-known lifeline designed largely for marriages that are on the brink of disaster. Its proponents – and there are thousands located all over the globe – insist it's the go-to tool for couples whose union has dissolved into a cold, unloving relationship and long to re-discover the love that once united them. Just spending a few moments with Carl and Sherran Esh bears out the success of the program.

He's a stoic classicist who holds a degree in applied physics and worked in nuclear power plants. She's more the emotional romantic who became a registered nurse and



»»The Esh's in the early years of their marriage, including their wedding (top middle) and with their two children Lynn and Matt.

still tears up to recall the peaks and valleys in their lives together. But the differences that used to both define and separate them from one another have morphed into complementary measures. They have learned tolerance and forgiveness. They have come to better understand what it is to be truly human. And more than ever before, they realize there's a spiritual component to marriage that, for them, manifests itself in their Catholic faith.

A marriage on the rocks

They started out like a lot of couples in our midst – young, buoyant and optimistic. They both graduated high school in 1964, she from Muskegon High and he from Muskegon Heights. They lived scant miles apart, though didn't meet until a mutual friend showed Carl a photo of Sher.

He asked for her address, and they began exchanging letters, which went on for many months while Carl attended college some 500 miles away, at Michigan Technological Institute. Only after finishing his first semester did they finally meet face to face, when Carl picked up Sher at her student nurse's dormitory and escorted her to Sher's sister's 13th birthday party.

Fifteen months later, they married, and after a short

honeymoon, returned to Michigan's Upper Peninsula for his final semester of studies. They then moved to New York where Carl began a career in the utility industry. They had two children, Lynn and Matt.

Over the course of 28 years, they moved around some, within Illinois and Ohio and finally back to Michigan in 1996. It was during their time in Toledo, Ohio, that they realized they were living separate lives, which was complicated by Sher's diagnosis of fibromyalgia, characterized by constant muscle pain. There were other crises as well, too personal to publicize, but the sort of hurdles that many couples face.

At one point, Sher says she felt "stupid and disgusted at the poor decision I made to marry Carl, and we went into family counseling. I judged Carl to be so passive that he caused our marriage to come to the brink of failure."

Both Sher and Carl agree that "To sum it up, the source of our misery was an accumulation of wounds over a long period of time."

A message from God

For their 25th wedding anniversary, they visited Mackinac Island, but grew no closer. On the edge of sheer despair, Sher attended a women's retreat in Ohio – it's



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where they were living in 1993 -- and met a nun who told her about a priest involved in something called Retrouvaille. She now considers it nothing less than a message from God. Sher told Carl what she'd learned, and they agreed to go.

Their lives would never be the same.

“It was,” recalls Sher, “the miracle we were looking for.”

Their struggles didn't disappear, but they learned how to handle disputes, disagreements and disappointment and move forward.

Sher stopped blaming Carl for most of their troubles, and Carl in turn grew more cognizant of and sensitive to Sher's needs. Rather than retreat into themselves when they endured individual pain and hurt, they learned to bounce it off the other. They talked. They did more things together. They made commitments.

They came to accept the fact that yes, their kids and grandkids live too far away in Ohio to visit enough, but it was something they'd accept with patience and grace.

And they realized something else. “Retrouvaille not only saved our marriage,” says Carl, “but it made such a positive impact on our lives that we decided to become involved in its healing ministry.”

Helping spouses forge new relationships

Now Carl and Sherran Esh help guide other couples, and have been doing so for more than 15 years. Several weekends each year, they team with a priest and other couples in Retrouvaille leadership positions to conduct programs. They meet men and women struggling with everything from alcoholism to infidelity. Some are on the edge of disaster. Others already have split. But all who attend are interested in what for most is one last chance.

“We would like to think that all marriages are made in heaven,” says Carl, “but some go through hell.”

The logo for Retrouvaille is a life ring, the sort guards use at waterfronts to save lives. It's an apt symbol for men and women drowning in self-pity, abuse, loneliness and a host of other ailments that can drag a couple down for good. In part, Retrouvaille relies on the supposition that people can forgive, forge new and better relationships, and change.

“Many of the couples have an epiphany by Saturday afternoon,” says Carl. “But on the Friday evening they

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arrive, you can feel the tension. Some of them, well, they drive there separately.”

It's not easy, even for those who religiously attend the post-weekend seminars, which are touted as being equally important as the initial encounter.

“It's a ministry of wounded healers,” Sher acknowledges.

But from humble beginnings in 1977, Retrouvaille has emerged as a powerful worldwide force that, according to multiple studies, can help salvage up to 80 percent of the marriages of couples in crisis. What impressed Carl from the start was how much he found to have in common with other men and women attending Retrouvaille.

“None of them were telling my story,” he says, “but all of them were telling parts of it. So you could identify with the people there.”

Sher, too, observed something that made her come to the conclusion she was as deserving as the next person to be permitted another chance. She condenses the feeling into a few words that she uses often to remind us of who we all are.

“People,” she says, “are imperfect on this side of heaven.” ☩

>> The extended Esh family; (from left to right) son-in-law Steven Emerson, granddaughter Paige Emerson, daughter Lynn, Carl, Sherran, son Matthew, daughter-in-law Andrea Esh, grandsons Isaac, Jared and Logan Esh.



Retrouvaille

>> **ORIGINS:** Retrouvaille (REH-tro-vie) is a French word meaning rediscovery. It has its roots in a Canadian couple who, in 1977, weren't finding enough satisfaction in their Worldwide Marriage Encounter group and eventually founded Retrouvaille. It grew slowly at first, but, after nearly 35 years, has grown to an international level, hosting programs in Africa, Europe, South America, Australia, Mexico, the Philippines and elsewhere.

>> **WHAT IT IS:** A typical Retrouvaille program combines a weekend experience with a series of 6-12 post-weekend sessions over a period of three months. The main emphasis is on communication and rediscovery. During the weekend phase, couples are typically led by a team of three couples and a priest who will urge participants to put the past behind them and develop a sense of forgiveness. After presentations, couples discuss issues in privacy, not group sessions.

>> **WHAT IT IS NOT:** Retrouvaille is not a retreat, nor is it marriage “counseling” or a sensitivity group. There are no group dynamics or group discussions on the weekend. It is not a time for hurting, but rather healing. While Catholic in origin, you do not need to be one, and no one will try to convert you. The emphasis is on saving marriages.

>> **WHO'S ELIGIBLE:** Primarily couples with marital problems who are considering separation, as well as those already separated and even divorced. But both parties must want help. Lawyers and judges sometimes send couples to Retrouvaille as a prerequisite to filing for divorce.

>> **THE COST:** Because there's no budget for Retrouvaille and its leaders volunteer their time, there is a mandatory registration fee. Outside of that, each couple is asked to make a donation to cover the cost of lodging, meals and materials required for a weekend and post-weekend sessions. But no couple is ever denied for lack of funds.

>> **LOCALLY, WHEN AND WHERE CAN WE ATTEND A SESSION?:** Several Retrouvaille programs a year are hosted within the diocese. At least two more sessions are scheduled for 2010 in Grand Rapids on the weekends of May 13 and Nov. 4. In Lansing, sessions are set for Aug. 5 and Sept. 9. Check the Web site for upcoming dates. You must pre-register.

>> **LEARN MORE:** Visit retrouvaille.org or call **1.800.470.2230**.

Local: Contact Tony or Julie Gessner at tnjgess@sbcglobal.net or **616.785.2725**.



>> In 2008, Pope Benedict said that the people who guide the Retrouvaille program are “custodians to a greater hope,” that troubled couples meet and have lost along the way.