

Black Marriage Day celebrates marriage in black community



Alisa Harris and Michael Veney, Oak Park.

PHOTOS CREDIT: Marlon Hines

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Mark and Travina Tucker

They've decided that sooner is better than later, thanks to the Black Marriage Day 2013 festivities that they recently attended at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History.

Alisa Harris and Michael Veney were so inspired by the event that they've moved their impending nuptials up 10 months. The Oak Park couple now plan to wed this summer rather than during Memorial Day weekend next year.

"We realized that we did not want to wait," Harris said, summing up of an entire Saturday spent with other couples from throughout southeast Michigan that prompted her and her fiancé to accelerate becoming husband and wife.

In the weeks that have passed since mingling with so many lasting married pairs at that event, Harris and Veney say they have resolved to culminate their nearly four-year engagement with a small, intimate wedding on July 26. And they've scrapped their original plans for a big ceremony aboard a charter yacht on the Detroit River to make it happen. Instead, Harris, a retired social worker, and Veney, who owns a commercial maintenance service, will exchange vows before just a few relatives and friends at Macedonia Baptist Church in Detroit, where Veney is a member.

"I had such a good time (at Black Marriage Day), when we go back next year we're going back as the Veneyes," Veney said after attending the recent event at the Wright museum.

That's just the kind of impact Nisa Muhammad, executive director of the Wedded Bliss Foundation in Washington, D.C., had in mind when she first launched Black Marriage Day in 2002. A journalist and lecturer who knows first-hand what it is to be married, divorced, a single mother and remarried, she wanted to help spur a major cultural shift in the African American community, where only 30 percent of people are married.

That, according to social experts across the board, is the lowest marriage rate of any ethnic or racial group in this country. The result is a segment of the overall U.S. population marked by three out of four children born out of wedlock -- children, these experts point out, who consequently are most vulnerable to such ills as poverty, teen pregnancy, delinquency, domestic violence and substance abuse.

They are merely reflecting the disadvantaged home life that is all too common for children raised by single parents, said Detroit family therapist Robert Williams. It's like a rippling effect, with dysfunctional attitudes and behaviors passed from generation to generation.

And, Williams added, overshadowing the children's patterns of courtship and marriage in adulthood. "They want to have healthy relationships, but they don't have the wherewithal to form them, so they don't gravitate toward them," he explained. "Instead, they align themselves with the (unhealthy) environments they have been exposed to.

Muhammad came up with Black Marriage Day to help foster healthier relationships among teens, singles and couples so more black children grow up with the benefits of a two-parent family. A year after devising her initiative, 30 communities nationwide were on board. Typically observed the fourth Sunday of every March, with related festivities often all week up to that day, this year's 10th anniversary celebration saw Black Marriage Day hailed in some 300 communities around the country.

But the gain in momentum has not come easily. "Black Marriage Day is running counter culture to what is expected for black people," said Muhammad, who travels the country touting the value and benefits of marriages to young black people in particular. "We live in a culture that does not support, encourage and promote marriage in the black community."

Instead, young blacks are nursed on a steady diet of popular music and TV shows aimed at them "that encourages sex without responsibility," Muhammad lamented. Add to that how married black couples, according to her, have "made marriage look old, tired and boring." Add the reality that, in fact, "a lot of black marriages are troubled," and it's no

wonder a lot of young single blacks are now turned off by this tradition.

In contrast, with the current number of married African Americans having plummeted to about a third of the community from two-thirds in 1960, "every generation in the black community tends to wind up starting from scratch," Muhammad added.

"We have to help people see the wonder and value of marriage," Muhammad maintained, not only for respective couples and their children, but communities overall. Communities that have lots of married people also tend to have better schools, lower crime, higher property values and local politicians who are far more responsive to them than other voters, she said.

It was the Wright Museum's third straight year partnering with another community-oriented nonprofit group, the Marriage Resource Center, to host such a tribute. Harris and Veney learned about Black Marriage Day for the first time at the beginning of this year, participating in the marriage counseling provided through the Family Enrichment Ministry where Harris worships, Eastside Church of Christ in Pontiac.

Christina Dixon, vice chairwoman of the Marriage Resource Center's board of directors, opened Black Marriage Day 2013 in the Wright Museum's lavish General Motors Theater. Nneka Owens, a Dearborn-based psychotherapist who has appeared in Essence magazine, and on WXYZ Channel 7 and Oprah Winfrey's OWN network, took the stage next as keynote speaker, addressing the importance of commitment and taking questions and comments from the audience. Harris and Veney, both 44, snagged the "Most Romantic Proposal" honor, sharing how they first met and became friends 11 years ago as volunteers for the Oak Park Youth Athletic Association. They finally got engaged in 2009.

Harris and Veney were on their way back home from central Michigan dropping off the oldest of, by that time, five kids between them at Alma College for her freshman year.

They stopped at the Tanger Outlets in Howell to do some shopping and, while at a jewelry store with a ring in hand, Veney called Harris over to him and pronounced, "Let's do this. I love you. Will you marry me?"