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Marriage a battered institution, studies show

Most people want to marry, but divorce rates and the number of unmarried parents have soared, especially in Oregon

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BILL GRAVES

President Bush vowed last week to "protect marriage in America" from a few judges who "are presuming to change the most fundamental institution of civilization."

But he may be too late, researchers and statistics say.

A constitutional amendment defining marriage as a union between one man and one woman would bar marriage for gay and lesbian couples, but it does nothing to stop other forces that are battering and reshaping marriage.

Climbing rates of divorce, unmarried parents, out-of-wedlock births and adults choosing to remain single have pummeled marriage in the past four decades. And several of those trends are unfolding in Oregon at rates surpassing the national average.

Marriage has lost its defining role in determining how children are raised and how people make commitments to each other, says Stephanie Coontz, a family historian and professor at The Evergreen State College in Olympia.

Still, most Americans want to marry, and 85 percent of adults do sometime in their lives, many more than once.

Lance Boetel, 32, and Jayme Payne, 26, of Northeast Portland decided to give marriage another whirl Thursday in the Multnomah County Courthouse. She had wedded once before; he twice. Between them, they have four daughters from previous marriages.

"We want to let everyone know we are serious," says Boetel, as he and Payne wait outside Judge Paula Kurshner's chambers.

The Portland couple stand before Judge Kurshner in her black robe. The ceremony is brief but touching.

"We must give ourselves in love, but we must not give ourselves away," says Judge Kurshner.

Americans place high, sometimes impossible, expectations on their marriages, which is one reason so many don't last, experts say.

"Few at the altar are conscious of the enormity of their expectations," wrote author and psychologist James Hollis. "No one would speak aloud the immense hopes: 'I am counting on you to make my life meaningful' . . . 'I am counting on you to read my mind and anticipate all my needs.' "

Lisa Davis, 42, of Portland said she and her husband, Mark Davis, 42, were not so starry-eyed when they married in August. Both had previous marriages.

"I was very idealistic at 21," she said. "Both of us this time around said, 'This is it; through thick and thin, we are going to stick it out.' "

Role of children changes

Through most of the nation's history, marriage has served primarily as an institution bringing men and women together to raise children.

But increasingly, Americans see marriage chiefly as an intimate relationship between adults that is not necessarily connected with raising children, according to a report last year by the National Marriage Project, a nonpartisan institute at Rutgers University in New Jersey devoted to strengthening marriage through research.

More couples are choosing not to have children, and among any three couples getting married, one already has children, the Census Bureau reports. .

The quest for an idealistic relationship is reflected in a 2001 survey by the National Marriage Project, which showed that 94 percent of single men and women ages 20 to 29 expected their marriage to unite them with a soul mate.

"We expect more of marriage than we ever have in history," says Coontz, who is writing a book on the history of marriage. "We expect it to be more fair, more loving . . . When we feel it doesn't meet those standards, we feel free and are generally accepting of the idea that people can leave a marriage."

Consequently, divorce laws have loosened. In 2002, the National Center for Health Statistics reports about 2.3 million marriages compared with about 1.1 million divorces. By contrast, there were about 1.5 million marriages and about 390,000 divorces in 1960.

"It is not to be entered into lightly but with certainty."

A growing number of couples choose to live together before getting married or to not marry at all. That's one reason the median age of first marriages has climbed from 20 for women and 23 for men in 1960 to 25 and 27, respectively, today.

The nation's rate of unmarried couples who live together has increased tenfold in the past four decades and is particularly high among the young.

High rates in Multnomah County

In Oregon, Multnomah County has the nation's fifth highest cohabitation rate among large counties. One-sixth of all couples living together in the county are unmarried, the Census Bureau reports.

Young couples "can get all the sex they want outside of marriage," says David Popenoe, co-director of the National Marriage Project at Rutgers.

More than half of first marriages are preceded by living together. One reason is young people have grown up in an era of high divorce and want to test their relationships before exchanging wedding vows, Popenoe says.

But research suggests that those who live together before marriage are more likely to break up after. And it is partly because more unmarried couples live together that more babies -- about a third -- are born out of wedlock.

Bad news for kids

In Oregon, the proportion of children born to unmarried mothers has been climbing in the past four decades, from about one in 16 in 1965 to one in three in 2002, slightly below the national average.

The growing disconnect between children and marriage is bad news for kids, researchers say, because children generally fare best with married parents.

Children living with unmarried parents are at higher risk of sexual and physical abuse from boyfriends. Generally, children growing up with single or unmarried parents face higher risks for social and behavioral problems, including drug and alcohol abuse, crime, school failure and illness.

"Today's celebration of human affection is therefore the outward sign of a sacred and inward commitment which religious societies must consecrate and states must legalize."

It is hard to separate church and state in any discussion about marriage -- many religions see hallowed meaning in the union between a man and a woman.

And the civic and religious significance of marriage has changed throughout history and varies widely among peoples and faiths, social historians say.

Five centuries ago, relationships in marriage were secondary to its economic and practical benefits, said Coontz, the social historian. People married to acquire wealth and influence or to find someone who could help them earn a living, she said.

"For thousands of years, love, harmony and affection were gravy," she said.

Under the law, the notion of equality in U.S. marriages is relatively recent.

"That is a fundamental transformation of marriage," says Bernadette Brooten, professor of Christian studies at Brandies University.

"You will stand with her in sickness and health, in joy and sorrow."

Researchers agree that marriage is worth fighting for because it benefits just about everyone. Not only do children fare better in marriage, but so do adults and the community they live in.

"You have intentions to stay together forever, and you want to do everything you can to support that intention," said Margi Brown, 43, of Southwest Portland, who married Matthew Waite, 41, in October. "Our church community is supporting

that, and our friends in general (support that) . . . They strengthen us. We in turn strengthen the community."

Generally, studies show that people who are married are healthier, live longer, advance further in their careers, earn more money and are happier than single adults.

Marriage movements emerge

Several movements have emerged across the nation in recent years to strengthen marriage. The Bush administration says it plans to launch a \$1.5 billion initiative this year to promote marriage, especially among low-income couples. The plan would help couples develop interpersonal skills that sustain "healthy marriages."

Some churches require couples to go through counseling before marrying them.

Katherine Spaht, a law professor at Louisiana State University, wrote a law that allows residents who marry to choose a covenant marriage, which has restrictions that make it harder to divorce than the state's no-fault divorce laws. Without adultery, conviction for a felony, physical or sexual abuse or abandonment, the only way a couple can divorce in a covenant marriage is by separating for two years.

Spaht said she introduced the law, which passed in 1997, for children.

"Every adult experiment we have done to please ourselves and meet our own desires have negatively impacted children," she said. "I want more children to grow up in the home of permanently married parents."

The divorce rate in covenant marriages has been about half that for others. But only about 4 percent of couples are choosing covenant unions, Spaht said. Arizona and Arkansas have also passed covenant marriage laws, and many churches, including some in Oregon, offer covenant ceremonies.

"To be known in this way is a priceless thing."

Recent trends suggest marriage may be holding its own after four decades of decline. Social researchers have a good grasp of what makes marriages succeed and fail and can better guide couples into marriage or help them save their marriages when they get in trouble, said Dr. Herman Frankel, director of the Divorcework Center in Portland, which offers education and guidance services.

The percentage of African American babies born outside of marriage has dropped slightly in the past five years, and the percentage of children in two-parent families has inched up. Slightly more adults in their 30s are marrying, and the divorce rate is slowly declining.

But nothing holds more promise for marriage than the fact that the vast majority of Americans still want it, still want to find someone they can honor, love and cherish for the rest of their days.

"I now pronounce that they are husband and wife."

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