

NEWS & RECORD

Happy, healthy, safe: New UNCG, Phillips Foundation effort to strengthen relationships

By John Newsom john.newsom@greensboro.com Jan 31, 2017



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Dr. Christine Murray, a UNCG professor and director of the Healthy Relationships Initiative, speaks about the new program, Tuesday, Jan. 31, 2017, at UNCG's Leonard J. Kaplan Center for Wellness in Greensboro, N.C.

GREENSBORO — UNC-Greensboro and the Phillips Foundation think they have work together to improve the quality of life in Guilford County.

Their approach? Foster happy, healthy and safe relationships.

The university and the Greensboro foundation on Tuesday announced the launch of the Healthy Relationships Initiative. This effort aims to improve the health of Guilford County residents by strengthening the bonds among people, couples, families and their community.

“I don’t think you can stress that enough — that there’s a relationship between individual health, familial health, relationship health and public health,” UNCG Chancellor Frank Gilliam said. “It all goes hand in hand.”

The initiative will offer workshops, counseling, educational sessions and other information to help local residents improve their relationships. The initiative also plans to train employees of local nonprofits and community organizations.

This effort is based on research that suggests that fractured personal relationships give rise to drug abuse, child abuse and domestic violence — things that have what Gilliam called a “deeply corrosive effect on a community.”

The project also hopes to remove the stigma around seeking help for problems in a relationship, said UNCG professor Christine Murray, who’s also serving as director of the Healthy Relationships Initiative.

“People don’t like to admit when they’re having problems in their relationships. It can be embarrassing to feel like you need to reach out for help,” said Murray, an associate professor of counseling and educational development at UNCG.

“Our goal is to break down some of those barriers and say ... relationships are hard,” she added. “It’s normal to have problems in a relationship. It’s also normal to reach out for help.”

The initiative hopes to be proactive by strengthening personal bonds before they have a chance to fray.

Catherine Johnson is director of the Guilford County Family Justice Center, which provides legal, social and health services to victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and child and elder abuse. She also sits on the initiative’s advisory board.

In the 19 months the center has been open, Johnson said it has helped 8,300 people and families.

The Healthy Relationships Initiative, “will plant seeds of prevention and nurture the undeniable connection between prevention and intervention,” Johnson said.

The project grew out of the personal experience of Elizabeth Phillips, executive director of the Phillips Foundation.

When Phillips lived in Dallas, she got to know Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt, relationship experts who have written best-selling self-help books and developed a popular approach to patching up troubled marriages.

As the Phillips Foundation threw its support behind programs to help children and end homelessness, Phillips said she began to realize something: these causes, she said, “would not need so many public and philanthropic dollars to resolve if we could find ways to prevent trauma and instability in the home, especially early in life.”

The foundation approached UNCG’s counseling and educational development department, consistently ranked among the best such programs in the nation. The university and foundation have worked for the past two years to develop the relationships program.

The Phillips Foundation has given millions of dollars toward the Say Yes Guilford scholarship fund and construction of the Steven Tanger Center for the Performing Arts and the new Salvation Army Boys and Girls Club. But Phillips cautioned that the relationships initiative will be harder to see and measure than other foundation projects. The foundation did not disclose its contribution to UNCG for this project.

“This is a deeper cultural transformation,” said Phillips, who sits on UNCG’s Board of Trustees. “Our goal is for individuals, couples and families to better understand themselves and their relationships ... to prevent relational dysfunction that can lead to domestic violence, abuse (and) divorce (and) to help people go from surviving to thriving.”

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UNCG

HRI EVENTS

The Healthy Relationships Initiative has planned several events for February to introduce itself to the community:

Every Sunday in February: “Sundays Unplugged” — one free adult admission to the Greensboro Children’s Museum if you leave your phone at the front desk.

Feb. 11: “Family Fun Day” — games, snacks and a community art project at four local YMCA branches; 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Feb. 13: “Community Date Night” — get a discount at some local restaurants by disconnecting from technology for the evening.

Feb. 15: UNCG men’s basketball game, 7 p.m. at the Greensboro Coliseum; buy tickets for \$5 through the HRI website.

Feb. 16-17: “Random Acts of Kindness Days” — hand out compliment cards to people who do good deeds; participants are eligible for gift cards.

Feb. 18: “From Conflict to Conversations” — a workshop for adult couples; 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at UNCG. Register online.

Feb. 28: “Tech Safety in Teen Relationships” — a workshop for teens and parents about staying safe in relationships in the digital age; 6:30 p.m. at Northwest High School (register online).

All month: HRI Oral History Project — The Greensboro Public Library and the Smith Senior Center are interviewing adults 55 and older to learn about their life lessons for relationships. To take part, call (336) 373-7564.

For more details and to register for events, visit the Healthy Relationships Initiative website at www.guilfordhri.org.
