

NEWS & RECORD

Christine Murray: Healthy relationships matter

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Tuesday is Valentine's Day, which means that many of us will take time to either celebrate the relationships we have or reflect on the relationships we wish we had. Indeed, thoughts of love will be in the air this week.

Special days like holidays are important for relationships, but the daily care and attention we pay matter much more to the health of our relationships than holidays, birthdays and even date nights or fancy vacations. This is true for romantic relationships, but the same could be said for many other types of relationships, such as parenting, friendships and workplace associations. Daily attention to loving, caring for and supporting one another is the hallmark of healthy relationships. Even simple gestures like listening and expressing gratitude go a long way toward building trust and underscoring the value of our relationships.

What happens between people every day certainly makes a difference in the quality of their relationships, but have you considered how much relationships also are affected by the community context surrounding them? Many people view relationships and family life as private, behind-closed-doors parts of life. However, this model breaks down when people lack the skills, resources or support to build or maintain healthy relationships. Negative relationship outcomes can take a huge toll on individuals and the broader community, including through decreased school performance or work productivity, physical and mental health problems, and a diminished social fabric of the community. On the flip side, positive relationships provide a foundation on which children and adults can grow into caring, engaged community members. Thus, the health of relationships within a community is an important public health issue.

Here in Guilford County, UNC-Greensboro and the Phillips Foundation are working with many other public- and private-sector partners to cast a new vision for building a community that supports, honors and celebrates healthy relationships of all kinds. This month, we are launching Healthy Relationships Initiative, or HRI, with a mission of infusing the community with information, resources and services to promote happy, healthy and safe relationships and prevent the negative consequences of relationship distress.

Why is this community-based approach to building healthy relationships so important for our community at this time? Guilford County today is a hotbed of activity in the development of new resources to strengthen our community, including such transformative initiatives as Say Yes to Education, Ready for School, Ready for Life and the Guilford County Family Justice Center. And yet, there is an abundance of data that show relationships and family life remain difficult for many residents.

Our UNCG team's research during the HRI planning process identified many significant community-level barriers that can make it more difficult for residents to build happy, healthy and safe relationships. These include economic challenges, housing and transportation needs, isolation, the proliferation of technology, difficulty navigating community resources, and the stigma around seeking help or admitting when relational problems are present.

Through community mobilization, social marketing and educational programs, HRI will work to make it easier for residents to strengthen their relationships and navigate relationship challenges. To celebrate this month's launch of HRI, we've got a great lineup of events and activities, especially centered on Healthy Relationships Week, now through Saturday. With support from such partners as the Greensboro YMCA, Greensboro Children's Museum, UNCG Athletics and Quaintance-Weaver restaurants and hotels, our launch events offer opportunities for people to connect within the important relationships in their lives. More information about these events can be found at www.guilfordhri.org/about-us/communitylaunch.

The vision that drives HRI is for Guilford County to become a community in which all people experience happy, healthy and safe relationships of all kinds. As we celebrate Valentine's Day this week and the launch of HRI throughout the month, I invite you to consider ways you can strengthen relationships in your own life and in our community, such as learning a new relationship skill, offering support to someone you know who's facing a difficult relationship challenge, or simply taking uninterrupted time to spend with someone who matters to you.

Major celebrations have their place in strengthening relationships. However, we must make efforts every day to truly build a community that provides a context in which all people can experience the joy of healthy relationships.

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