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## COUPLES SOUGHT FOR PROGRAM DESIGNED TO STRENGTHEN AFRICAN-AMERICAN MARRIAGES

ATHENS, Ga. – Helping African-American couples learn how to keep their marriages strong, whether they're newlyweds or have been married for many years, is the goal of a new program being offered in Greene, Taliaferro, Baldwin, Hancock, Washington, Jefferson, McDuffie and Putnam counties by the University of Georgia.

The Program for Strong African American Marriages, or ProSAAM, began a year ago in Northeast Georgia and has already involved about 200 couples, according to Tera Hurt, project coordinator.

“Our goal is to include 500 couples who are 21 years of age and over,” she explained. “One member of the couple must be African American and if the couple isn't married, they must have set a specific wedding date in the next 12 months.”

ProSAAM does not provide marriage counseling, according to Hurt. Rather, it is a research project that features an educational program for couples who are committed to sustaining their relationships. Participants in ProSAAM learn how to enhance their relationships, prevent problems, and handle those that arise. They also have a forum in which to discuss issues that are important to African Americans.

The Rev. Jerry Alexander, pastor of Springfield Baptist Church in Athens, speaks from personal experience when he endorses ProSAAM. "He has taken part in the educational program with his wife and is a consultant to the program rather than a participant"

“I recommend ProSAAM wherever I go,” he said. “I believe the program has much to offer and that it makes a difference in the quality of a relationship.”

In particular, Alexander said he encourages men to participate in the program.

“It is crucial that more African-American men become involved in ProSAAM,” he said. “Our involvement is ‘mission critical’ to the success of the African-American family.”

Alexander said he understands that some men fear being viewed as unable to “handle their business” if they participate in forums with other couples, but that he has seen the benefits of ProSAAM in his own marriage.

“Because I am a part of the program, I tend to focus more on the need for open and transparent communication in our marriage,” he said. “Through my connection to ProSAAM I find that I am less inclined to withdraw from situations that require intentional participation.”

Elder Terris Thomas of Timothy Baptist Church in Athens also serves as a consultant with ProSAAM, providing ongoing feedback and participating in the educational program with her husband. Because she is a consultant, she cannot take part in the research part of the program.

“At Timothy we are serious about how to enrich the lives of our members through community efforts and programs,” she said. “We believe ProSAAM helps to strengthen the message that is preached from the pulpit and view involvement in community programs such as ProSAAM as a benefit to our members.”

Thomas said she and her husband, who have been married for 19 years, have benefited from ProSAAM and have seen others do likewise.

“This program is not only for couples who are having problems, but the information received in ProSAAM serves as a support to all couples,” she said. “Some of the individuals in this program have been married decades and have spoken of the tremendous impact ProSAAM has had on them as a couple. They are quick to admit that having been together as long as they have, they are still learning.”

Like Thomas, other ProSAAM participants have also praised the program enthusiastically. One participant, a 40-year-old married African-American woman was succinct in her praise:

“Awesome,” she said

Another participant, a 33-year-old African-American married woman also had high praise.

“My experience in this program is priceless,” she said. The importance of being married was accentuated and it rejuvenated my sense to take my relationship more seriously.”

A 40-year-old male participant said, “It really helped broaden my listening skills and it gave me useful information on how to keep an argument from escalating. I would suggest that all African-American couples (especially men) take part in the Program for Strong African-American Marriages. I think it would be particularly beneficial to couples who are engaged. It could teach them how to start off with good listening skills and how to give non-critical advice. The program not only helps you be a better husband, it also helps you be a better father and a better man in general.”

A fourth participant viewed the program as going beyond enhancing her relationship with her husband.

“I look forward to finishing up the book we were given in hopes of having a stronger marriage,” she said. “Not only for us, but to mirror for my daughters what a strong marriage looks like.”

The study’s lead investigator is Dr. Steven R. H. Beach at the University of Georgia. Co-investigators on the project include Drs. Lily D. McNair of Spelman College, Velma McBride Murry of the University of Georgia, and Frank D. Fincham of Florida State University.

For more information or to take part in the program, call Tera Hurt or LaTrena Stokes, ProSAAM recruitment specialist, at 1-888-542-3068, or send email to [prosaam@uga.edu](mailto:prosaam@uga.edu).