An inventive philanthropic experiment seeks to strengthen America by bolstering marital ties

By Heather Wilhelm

While teaching a marriage class with his wife at church 25 years ago, Richard Albertson was shocked. In what was a routine exercise, his wife rated their own marriage a lowly two on a scale of one to ten.

“I said, ‘No, no, Elizabeth, ten is the high score. Two is incredibly low,’” Albertson recalls. He pauses. “And she’s like, ‘I know.’”

After that wake-up call, the Albertsons worked to restore their marriage—and, along the way, discovered a serious lack of resources available for troubled married couples. Today, Richard serves as president of Live the Life, a Tallahassee-based nonprofit dedicated to strengthening marriage and families. “Most people want a good marriage,”
Albertson says. “But here’s the problem: They don’t really know how to be married.”

In addition to the many couples who find their marriages floundering, there are others who never even get started in the first place. After decades of marital decline, the percentage of American adults who have never been married is at an all-time high, according to the Pew Research Center, and the percentage of children born outside of marriage is near it.

Forty percent of all births were to unwed mothers in 2014. That’s up from 5 percent in 1960. When it comes to giving their children a mother and father joined in a marriage bond, many millennials seem to be throwing in the towel.

As Charles Murray documented in his 2012 book *Coming Apart*, cratering marriage rates also widen a cultural divide. The marriage gap between upper-middle and working-class Americans, he has noted, now spans a whopping 35 percentage points—up from 10 in 1960. Single parenthood exhibits the same class split.

For a nation concerned with upward mobility and economic inequality, it’s a recipe for disaster—and for those who hoped that government programs could do more than flounder at solving the problem, it’s a source of quiet despair. Among social scientists there’s little disagreement: Intact families often offer the surest formula for economic success. “Children born into a continuously married family have much better economic mobility than those in single-parent families,” writes Isabel Sawhill, a scholar with the Brookings Institution.

According to the Census Bureau, when a child has married parents, the likelihood of child poverty

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Heather Wilhelm is a weekly columnist at RealClearPolitics.com and a senior contributor at the Federalist. Her syndicated column appears in the Chicago Tribune, Dallas Morning News, and Kansas City Star, among other newspapers.
drops by 82 percent. Single parents with children, meanwhile, are nearly six times more likely to face poverty than their married cohorts. While other factors certainly impact economic mobility—race, class, and educational attainment, among others—marriage is one of the strongest predictors when it comes to both family poverty and ability to climb the economic ladder.

“The strongest and most robust predictor” when it comes to mobility, Chetty’s study reports, “is the fraction of children with single parents…. Children of married parents also have higher rates of upward mobility if they live in communities with fewer single parents.”

Despite these well-established benefits, “marriage,” says Catherine Tijerina, who leads a family support nonprofit with her husband, Ron, in Ohio, “is treated as disposable. In our culture, the family is seen as disposable, too. Many people accept this as no big deal, without understanding or accepting the far-reaching negative implications of this cultural shift.”

**Trying something new**
The crisis in the modern family has been a subject of cultural and political concern for years. Various solutions have been proposed—like the Healthy Marriage Initiative launched at the federal level in 2001. But nothing has altered the troubling national trend lines.

“These are not problems that a bureaucrat or a legislator or a regulator can really fix,” suggests J. P. De Gance, executive vice president at The Philanthropy Roundtable. “These are issues of family and faith. As a friend from Texas once told me, trying to change the country by focusing on politics is a lot like trying to change the weather by playing with the thermometer. This is an issue for civil society.” Such a personal and private challenge, even one with far-reaching public implications, calls for a personal approach.

With this in mind, The Philanthropy Roundtable has recently launched a new “Culture of Freedom Initiative”—a privately funded cross-country partnership designed to strengthen families, and the religious participation that bolsters family life, in three demonstration communities: Phoenix, Arizona; Jacksonville, Florida; and Dayton, Ohio. The name, explains De Gance, was chosen to remind potential donors of the cultural root of a healthy society: the self-governing individuals created by strong families.

The initiative has raised $18 million over the past year to launch its pilot programs, with the goal of reaching an initial $40 to $50 million by the end of 2017. These funds will be used to boost local nonprofits capable of making an impact in its target cities. During the next five years, this first phase of a long-term effort will seek to increase two gauges of community health: marital success and family attendance at worship services.

The Culture of Freedom Initiative works in partnership with the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia run by Brad Wilcox. The program connects anchor nonprofits that have an established footprint in each of the target cities with national experts, event partners, media tools, marketing assistance, and measurement methods. It is guided by a task force of ten philanthropists with interests and expertise in this area.

“In my view, the breakdown of the family is the most significant problem facing the country today,” says task force member Toby Neugebauer, co-founder of Quantum Energy Partners, “and the Culture of Freedom Initiative is targeting it in an innovative way. I was overwhelmed and very impressed with the sophistication and professionalism here. I think we’re taking a fresh approach to a massive problem—an approach that heretofore has not been applied.”

**Partners in marriage**
With the goal of connecting successful nonprofits with other nonprofits—and with analytics, communications, and opinion- and behavior-altering tools used by many of the nation’s most successful businesses—the initiative was designed

If the United States enjoyed 1980 levels of married parenthood today, the growth in median income of families with children would be 44 percent higher.
as a “platform” approach. Rather than pushing a single top-down effort, a platform structure provides communal resources and then encourages many participants to take up issues in their own ways, with everyone working in parallel but independently toward common goals.

“Facebook is a platform that has basic rules and conditions that allow millions of people to create order around them in spontaneous ways. They can set up their own Facebook pages and communicate with each other and take action on common problems,” notes De Gance. “Likewise, across America, there are plenty of programs and individual champions out there who are, on a micro level, producing major changes in their areas when it comes to faith and family. We’re connecting and amplifying their efforts.”

One of these local champions is Creciendo Unidos in Phoenix, whose executive director, Guille Sastre, has worked since 1997 to strengthen marriages and families in the city’s Hispanic community. “There is a real hunger for these programs,” she says. “We have a waiting list, always, and people sometimes wait for a year or more. There is a perception that people don’t want to get help, or don’t care. That is not true. They may get discouraged when there is no help—but no, that’s not true.”

Creciendo Unidos has been reaching an average of 1,500 families per year. With help from the Culture of Freedom Initiative, the group has partnered with the Chicago-based organization Family Bridges for help in expanding its reach.

“There are many local efforts across the country working on the issues of family breakdown and family formation,” says Sean Fieler, a task force member and the president of Equinox Partners and the Kuroto Fund. “But there hadn’t been anything done to scale that was really going to help donors make a sophisticated determination as to what will work and what doesn’t work. That’s what appealed to me about this project. It pulls together the active leaders in this space who are proving to be effective, helps them, and helps others replicate their success.”

For Jacksonville, Live the Life, headed by Richard Albertson, serves as one such anchor nonprofit. “We started in 1998 with a $60,000 budget,” Albertson recalls. “Now we’re statewide in Florida.” That first year, Live the Life spearheaded a community marriage initiative in Leon County, Florida, which harnessed the resources of 85 churches, the county commission, the chief of police, and school-board officials—“multisector participation,” as Albertson says. By 2015, the divorce rate in Leon County had dropped 48 percent, more than double the drop in the divorce rate across the rest of the state.

Marital marketing

Through the Culture of Freedom Initiative, Live the Life has also partnered with Alpha, a marriage-enrichment and evangelization program; All Pro Dad, which uses sports to encourage strong fatherhood; and ThinkMarriage.org, a multimedia advertising campaign, among others. Perhaps most importantly, Live the Life will be combining policy research with microtargeted marketing to try to change behavior. “Microtargeted marketing has long existed in the commercial world. It’s existed in the political world. It is even used in the intelligence world,” says De Gance. “But in a lot of ways, the family and faith sector is still living, technologically, in the 1990s. This project is bringing it forward.”

The initiative has partnered with Right Brain People, a brand-strategy firm that’s worked with companies ranging
from Walmart to General Motors.
“It took a deep dive to help us really understand the emotional drivers and emotional barriers for 18- to 35-year-old working-class Americans when it comes to marriage,” said David Riggs, vice president of philanthropic strategy at The Philanthropy Roundtable. “What do they think about marriage? What do they think about faith? We wanted to know the best ways to approach this issue.”

Using the insights produced by Right Brain People research, ThinkMarriage.org, the advertising campaign partnering with the initiative, invites visitors to “Be Someone’s Someone,” with individually targeted messages sorted by where visitors are in life—Single? Married? Engaged?—with specialized messages for people in each of these areas. A campaign devoted to the idea of “Marriage Before Carriage” is now in the works.

Another project partner is Cambridge Analytica, which specializes in microtargeted outreach marketing to draw people into classes, programs, and events sponsored by the initiative. “With our budget, we’d normally never get to access this level of advertising and outreach,” says Richard Albertson of Live the Life. “If the Culture of Freedom Initiative just did that one thing—microtargeting for nonprofits—it would be enormous. But it’s also assisting the collaboration of all these different partners with different strengths, mobilizing different partners (from the academic world to the advertising world), all to put a laser beam on this critical social issue. It’s exciting. Let’s see if we can really produce results.”

Why faith and family?
For most of the initiative’s partner nonprofits, faith is a central building block for successful marriages; how that plays out in programming varies by organization. “The members of the task force have a wide range of theological perspectives and backgrounds,” De Gance notes, “but they all agree that this is one of the most crucial challenges facing our country. I think what makes the Culture of Freedom Initiative different from government projects like the federal Healthy Marriage Initiative is that we recognize that if you’re going to gut and remove faith from the equation, you’re going to have a hard time changing family behaviors.” Although the federal program emphasized partnerships with faith-based nonprofits, he explains, working with the government meant that they could not talk about their faith in context, which “cut out the core” of what they had to offer.

Faith and family tend to be mutually reinforcing, De Gance notes. Married couples are more likely to attend church, and churchgoers are more likely to form and maintain healthy marriages. The groups the Culture of Freedom works with reach people at both ends, some checking out a congregation after participating in its couples’ class, others finding family services through their church networks. In addition to having a moral language for understanding marital commitment, a supply of mentors and models, and practical services ranging from child care to date nights, the Culture of Freedom Initiative just did that one thing—microtargeting for nonprofits—it would be enormous. But it’s also assisting the collaboration of all these different partners with different strengths, mobilizing different partners (from the academic world to the advertising world), all to put a laser beam on this critical social issue. It’s exciting. Let’s see if we can really produce results.”
but we teach secular programming. We are serving people from all walks of life—Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Christians. When we go into prisons, it’s Latin Kings, Bloods, and Crips. We have a common understanding of the importance of family, and of wanting something better for your children.”

The Tijerinas gained firsthand experience with prison when Ron spent 15 years incarcerated for an accusation that was later recanted. Through RIDGE they focus on character and family development for incarcerated fathers and at-risk teens. Over its history, RIDGE has seen 7,500 families go through its program, along with approximately a thousand young people per year.

“A lot of families have never seen what healthy looks like,” Ron says. “They’ve been in generational cycles of divorce and incarceration and poverty. It sounds so basic, doesn’t it? But it’s really important to us that people learn about the value of truth and commitment and family. You have to be taught how to become a man or woman of your word. This is not automatic; it has to be learned. It’s cultural. Right now, for a lot of people, it’s simply not taught.”

Fundamentally, says De Gance, “lives are influenced because of relationships. Those authentic personal relationships are the bread and butter of civil society.” Extending and deepening constructive relationships is the goal of this initiative.

Small steps, big plans
Is it possible for grassroots efforts to make a difference on such a massive cultural issue? At the end of 2017, the initiative plans to take stock of successes, and what doesn’t work. While demographic behaviors are unlikely to shift in just two years, the initiative is tracking a number of proxies to determine if it is moving in the right direction.

For instance, the project will seek to understand whether or not specific attitudes improve against an established benchmark—attitudes seen as leading indicators for later behavioral change on marriage and faith. It will additionally see whether or not a coalition of nonprofits and churches can move more than 300,000 people in these communities through some form of face-to-face, self-improvement program by the end of next year. As data comes back on those proxies, efforts will turn to producing tangible improvements in the marriage rate, divorce rate, out-of-wedlock birth rate, and church attendance rate by the end of 2020 in these three cities. If that success is achieved, philanthropists will bring its techniques to new communities.

“Even though this is a daunting task, I think it’s the most critical and important thing we can do,” says Debra Waller, the CEO of Jockey International and another member of the task force. “In these test cities, we’re starting to see results. We’re seeing that people are receptive, and craving this sort of outreach. These nonprofits across the country are grassroots; they’re people helping people; and they’re focusing the rubber meets the road.” “We have a limited window of time to prove that we can move the numbers here,” says Sean Fieler. “There’s a sense of purpose and timeline and accountability in this project. I think we’ll know what has worked and what hasn’t worked as we head into 2017—and I think that’s going to be pretty significant.”

“Look, we know these principles—strong marriages, strong families—work for a successful country,” says task force member Michael Leven, currently chairman of the Georgia Aquarium and retired president of the Las Vegas Sands Corporation. Research has shown a “success sequence”—a prescription for life that involves graduating from school, working, getting married, and then having babies—that can help to make a “culture of prosperity” available to almost any American.

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