

Can we expect an emerging marriage renaissance? That was a question posed by the Founder and President of the San Antonio Marriage Initiative (SAMI), Carl Caton, to the crowd at one of the two events sponsored by the non-profit May 2 and 3 featuring prominent social scientist Brad Wilcox, Ph.D.

Brad addressed a group of 40 “friends and family” — ministry leaders, mental health professionals, pastors, marriage champions, and even a few divorce lawyers — on May 2 at the TriPoint Event Center. The following day the researcher headlined a Q & A for another 40 at an event designed for community leaders and policymakers to inspire them to encourage a family-centric social narrative in their sphere of influence.

Brad’s the Director of the National Marriage Project and Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia, Visiting Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, and a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Family Studies (IFS).

He’s spent the past two decades analyzing marriage and family data from thousands of Americans. His recent book, *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization*, claims that marriage is good for people— not only the children brought up in two-parent households, but also for men and women. In fact, he’s found a happy marriage is the number one predictor of global life satisfaction for people across the country. And the sense of well-being and purpose found in marriage provides a strong defense against our country’s mental health woes, loneliness and deaths of despair.

Since the release of his book in February of 2024, Brad’s been reviewed by *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Atlantic*, and *The New York Times*, three separate times.

Notes from May 2:

From Carl: God is redeeming and restoring marriages. Last year, SAMI put on 210 events for couples. 300 nights of the year there was a place couples could find help and hope through Re|Engage. We had 1 million engagements on social media.

“Your prayers, creativity, and effort are a holy act of worship,” Carl said. God has moved among his people to make San Antonio the most unique city in the country when it comes to marriage. In 2023 the national divorce rate dropped 6.53% - the single largest year drop on record since the 1970s, Carl said.

After introducing Brad, Carl asked him to share why he had become interested in researching marriage and family.

Brad grew up in Connecticut in a fatherless home, as his own dad passed away when he was very young and saw the way kids benefited by having a father in the household. Marriage was what connected men to their families. The 1970s were the “me-decade,” and out of Brad’s 5 closest friends – three of their parents were divorced, a number that jumped to four when Brad reached his teens.

He realized he wanted to go in a different direction to strengthen and stabilize marriages.

He began his presentation with the title:

Bad News, Good News: The State of Our Unions (with information found in his new book.)

Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence about the unalienable rights of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. But we are having difficulty in all these areas, he said.

Life is not doing all that well. More Americans are dying deaths of despair: suicide, drug addiction, alcohol poisoning.

In the case of Liberty: Thinking about attaining the American dream —millions of poor kids don't have a good shot financially. When asked, people don't think their kids are going to realize the American Dream.

The bad news is also true on the issue of happiness.

American happiness has hit record lows, according to both the Gallup Poll and General Social Survey.

Brad suggests Americans are chasing the wrong things. Too many Americans are focusing on building their own brand and career as the source of happiness and the center of their lives rather than love, marriage and family.

The New Ruling Class Message is what Brad titled the "Midas Mindset."

One trending headline on Twitter said women who stay single and don't have kids are getting richer. It's an anti-nuptial and anti-natal message. The article profiled a number of single and childless women "living their best lives." There was a story in *The Atlantic* called "The Case against Marriage." The *New York Times* wrote "Married heterosexual motherhood in America... is a game no one wins."

While the Left is very anti-marriage/motherhood, so is the Red Pill Right – widely popular online influencer Andrew Tate says that marriage is a bad deal for men. Most marriages end in divorce and men don't get status and respect. Another right-wing influencer, Pearl Davis, says "Modern marriage is a death sentence to men." Their message, "Use, but don't invest in, the opposite sex," has permeated young-adult culture.

Polls show many Americans think education, work and money are more important for fulfillment than marriage & family. This culture shift helps explain what Brad calls the closing of the American heart. The marriage rate is falling. Half of Americans today are not married. If trends continue, 1/3 of young adults will never marry.

He shared an example of Scott from his book. Scott has a graduate degree, a good job, a six-figure salary. ... but it doesn't mean anything in the end. He feels alone and at sea. Single adults are more likely to be struggling with loneliness, meaninglessness and sadness.

Brad quoted University of Chicago economist Sam Peltzman, who wrote in 2023 - The “recent decline in the married share of adults can explain (statistically) most of the recent decline in overall happiness.”

The Bad News: Less Marriage = Less Happiness for American Adults.

The Good News: The science that supports the work we are doing keeps moving in our direction. There’s been an academic and media shift.

One author who is not a conservative has been getting a lot of media attention in *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times* is Melissa Kearney. Her research highlights a driver of inequality that not enough people are talking about - the two-parent privilege. She provides empirical evidence that underlines the ways kids flourish when have the benefit of two married parents.

He then presented The Case for Saying I Do – how adults benefit from marriage. Nothing matters for happiness like a (good) marriage. Marriage predicts happiness better than education, work and money. People who rate their marriage as very happy are 545% happier than others.

Work like that done by SAMI to help people strengthen their marriages is very important, Brad said.

Connections, relationships, opportunities to care for others (like a spouse or children) are hugely predictive factors of happiness.

He noted 4 groups of Americans who are bucking the cultural tide and are markedly happier for it.

The “Masters of Marriage” are more likely to get married and be happily or stably married. Asian Americans, Conservatives, Strivers, Faithful (religious)

They defy elite ideology and value family vs individualism  
commitment vs choice  
tradition vs the new

5 pillars of a strong & stable marriage

Communion  
Children,  
Commitment,  
Cash  
Community

Elites stress a “me-first” approach to marriage that privileges autonomy, freedom and self-interest.” Brad gave an example of how Suzi Orman recommended couples keep separate checking accounts with “back-up money.”

Couples who didn’t take that advice did better.

Couples who pool income are happier and less prone to divorce, because sharing their money fuels mutual trust and communication.

He shared an example from the book of a military couple married 20+ years who initially navigated the issue of her student loan debt.

Couples who take a “we-before-me” approach are more likely to flourish.

Commitment - the new elite view privileges contingent commitment over permanence, and sexual choices over sexual fidelity. There’s a push to abolish monogamy and fidelity.

In contrast, Brad told the story of a husband who had several risk factors that could have potentially made him vulnerable to infidelity. He noted how the man took several steps to protect his marriage— describing himself openly as “I’m a family man.” He tags his wife on his social media posts and doesn’t “follow” old girlfriends, noting, “there’s a reason they are in that category.”

Brad said this man’s wife rated their marriage a 10 on happiness on a scale of 1 to 10. Honoring fidelity norms is why this couple was flourishing. Of those Americans who embrace the idea that sex outside of marriage is always wrong, 60% of them rate themselves as very happy.

Brad found the #1 predictor of marital quality is commitment.

He addressed community.

Again, the view from the elites is that belonging to a religious community is an obstacle to living your best life and being happy.

Brad found faith is a support in marriage. Couples who have a shared faith are happier. Across populations, the more faith, the less divorce.

This even spills into sexual satisfaction. Churchgoing couples have more sex, Brad reported. In 2000, there was no difference in sexual frequency between religious and secular couples, but in 2023, 2/3 of religious couples have sex once a week with more satisfaction. Less than half of secular couples do. The elite cultural prejudice that religion is an obstacle to sexual intimacy does not hold true.

Brad also mentioned the social power of religion’s “Ns.”

Norms like forgiveness and fidelity

Networks of family-oriented church goers.

Nomos – a sacred canopy that faith and religion casts over life. When troubles come, when you are a religious person, you are more able to navigate those experiences. You have a sense that God is with you and for you.

We acknowledge people have difficult chapters in their marriages. On any given Sunday 1/5 of married folks in the pews are struggling. But familial values, virtues and social networks found in religious communities strengthen marriage. What we see in America today, people who go to

church on a regular basis. – that means practically engaged in a religious community – are more likely to be married in the first place and happily married in the second place.

He encouraged attendees to be more confident and courageous about bringing this message to mixed or skeptical audiences. “The data is on our side.”

He offered four areas in which leaders could make a difference:

- Family life education in schools and youth groups
- Social media
- Preaching and ministry (Communio)
- Civic initiatives like SAMI that bring the message to the community.

Divorces are down 40% since 1980. Most marriages today go the distance. Other buffers to support marriage and reduce risk of divorce: if a couple is more educated, more religious, the husband works and they have regular date nights.

He stressed the importance of informing young men and women of the clear benefits of embracing marriage.

He then took some questions from the audience. One referenced the divorce rate in the Christian community and Brad’s research that those identified as “religious” had lower rates of divorce and happier marriages.

Brad responded with a reference to Barna and his definition of “religious” or “faithful.”

Self-identifying as “I’m a Christian” or “Born again” alone is not preventative of divorce. But if you are practicing your religion, regular attendance in a local congregation drops the rate of divorce by of 30-50%, he said. Being part of a community tends to support, strengthen and keep you accountable in your marriage.

Julian Schwartz asked a question about the benefit of marriage in increasing lifespan. Brad responded that Linda Wade wrote that men especially lived longer lives if they were stably married. And they do better health-wise. (except for the tendency to gain weight, to which he jokingly referenced the expansion of his waistline over the course of his marriage.)

He then broke down the likelihood of divorce by class and finances. We are heavily stratified by class in the U.S. College educated Americans are 60% less likely to get divorced, in part because they tend to have shared assets, own a home, have steady and more income.

Everything is heavily networked. If your friend gets over a sticky situation and doesn’t get divorced, your risk of divorce also goes down. If friends do the opposite, your odds skyrocket.

Surround yourself with social networks that are more stably married.

Less educated men are less connected to full-time work. Of guys in their prime who don't have college degrees, 25% are not employed full-time.

A husband's employment is a predictor of not getting married or getting divorced. He quoted research from Harvard that found when a wife lost her job, the situation had no effect on marriage. However, when the husband did, 30% divorced.

There's also a class divide — marriages with more educated husbands, and those employed full time do better. How do we lift the fortunes of our young men? They need to be successful in school, route some to vocational education, get off the X-box. We don't have a constructive model of masculinity for young men. That's one reason they are not flourishing.

He was asked whether he studied only male/female marriages or those in same sex relationships. Brad responded that his book researched heterosexual couples. He also noted less than 1% of kids in America are living in same sex couple families.

Jamie Patterson asked: How has his research impacted how he talks to his older kids about marriage? Brad said he was open to earlier marriage.

He noted that teens and young adults, even from religious backgrounds, are still getting the message to wait to marry until they are close to 30. This message is the same for the more secular kids. The focus is on education, getting your career launched.

From what I can tell, this younger generation is going to have trouble finding a good spouse. My advice: if your daughter or son meets a great person in college, there's no law that says wait until 28. There's no guarantee somebody else better is going to come along. Those who get married in their young 20s are happier than those who wait until their 30s to marry. The risk of divorce (caused by the immaturity of the young) is mitigated if they go to church together.

He was asked how people outside of the religious community are responding to his work. He's had 3 pieces published in *The New York Times* that were relatively favorable. Governor Cox in Utah is supportive. Senator Marco Rubio in Florida is an endorser.

Carl mentioned when Brad's article first came out in *The New York Times*, it engendered 1800 negative comments within hours.

All the comments were micro stories. No one could realize that marriage could make them happy. There's so much cultural pain around marriage and divorce.

The pendulum has been swinging this way for a long time, Carl continued. This cultural trend has been running out of energy. So much pain, anger and frustration. So much anxiety about becoming married. Each one of those stories - people are really hurting. No matter all the thoughts, people still long for the connection that marriage brings.

Without data, all you have is an opinion.

Notes from May 3 – Public Policy Audience

Finding creative solutions to our nation's societal problems was the theme of the May 3 policy meeting. Carl exhorted the 40 attendees in the diverse crowd from non-profit, schools, philanthropy and business sector to think about how to spend money and energies to battle societal problems upstream. This meeting was a different format – a Q&A with Brad as the headliner titled: Why Family Matters. Carl posed questions about the realities that families are facing.

The answers are here, Carl said. All the resources we need are not working well together. We need to unlock the resources for progress.

He asked the crowd, “Who should be here who is not here? How can you share what you are learning?”

“I believe the strength of a nation is built on the character of its people. The character of its people is formed and forged in its families. There's a connection between the strength of our country and the families of its communities. This is supported by the social sciences and by our founding fathers.

As we rediscover what the founding fathers wrote, they used the word Virtue more than the word Freedom. “We can only govern men if they were governable. (paraphrase) He quoted James Madison: “If Men were angels, no government would be necessary.” and “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”

Churchill – “There is no doubt that it is around the family and the home that all the greatest virtues, the most dominating virtues of human, are created, strengthened and maintained.”

Our virtues, values and vision are passed generationally through lines of affection. They are more caught than taught through parents. Carl then introduced Brad as our nation's leading researcher on family.

Question: How is tech involving teens?

Families are struggling how to address this structure. (We've seen) dramatic spikes in depression and anxiety. ER visits for self-harm for girls more than doubled since 2010. Socializing in person dropped by half since 2010. How do we create more in-person relationships.

Is this a problem or a panic?

The Anxious Generation. There's been an epidemic of mental illness. We are letting ourselves and our kids spend way too much time on screens. Bullying, comparison, time.

Brad read a story of a 13-year-old girl who was severely affected by her social media usage. “I can't stop comparing myself.” “It came to point I wanted to kill myself.” It started when she was 10.

Are there solutions in the policy area of schools? He suggested new norms and new policies. Utah just passed legislation requiring age verification for kids. Those under 18 require parental permission (to visit social media sites, I believe).

Some schools are putting smart phones into pockets or lockers. Data from U.S. and France and UK shows having access to phones in school diminishes learning, and especially for the most vulnerable. Phone bans see improved academics.

He recommends schools require students to relinquish their phones. As for parents granting access - delay, delay, delay. Brad's personal example was that some of his children got their smart phones at the trending age - 8th grade – which he said was a “disaster for the older kids.” He and his wife have done things differently for their 14-year-old twins, who have a new type of limited phone. Parents have new ways to handle this.

Carl mentioned nextTalk's Mandy Majors as a rising star presenting ways to talk to kids about tech. A woman answered a question about technology and depression. She said we should emphasize relationships and strong families rather than culture.

We need to start thinking more strategically about problems. These presenting problems are driven by deeper issues, Carl said.

Brad introduced the concept of “Male malaise” pertaining to men, education and work. Males are floundering. He was at a middle school awards assembly and noticed the clear majority of those getting awards were girls. 2/3 of kids at UVA getting the best grades are girls. Soon 60% of college graduates will be female.

Of men who are not college educated, 1/2 of them are not working full-time. They are checking out. These things affect their capacity to be attractive as boyfriends and spouses.

He hears from women it's hard to find young men worthy of commitment.

Schools are not doing enough to create a boy-friendly environment and curriculum. They need recess and male teacher role models.

Boys spend too much time with online gaming platforms, which retards social skills and doesn't prepare them for difficult tasks in school and work. It's hard to focus on homework, show up on time or learn a trade. Culture doesn't give young men a clear and compelling model of masculinity with a clear and distinctive mission to fulfill. So, boys are just spending time on devices and hanging out.

Public school districts need to be more intentional about limiting the use of technology, Brad said, including smart phones and chrome books. Kids learn better when reading real books and writing by hand.

He acknowledged it is hard to put the genie back in the bottle.



Another issue Brad addressed was Family Affordability:

He gave examples from Europe to make family life more affordable including offering discounts on utility bills to families with children. Like Europe, most countries on the American continent are experiencing less-than-replacement fertility levels.

People are more open to having kids and more of them when they have access to single family homes. Brad suggested being creative with community planning to offer a variety of housing densities. Or decreasing builder regulations that increase the cost of housing. He mentioned building a home that includes a casita or apartment to encourage intergenerational ties.

Problems on the Home Front are realized differently for boys and girls. Boys tend to externalize - act out, get in fights, drop out. Girls internalize and experience anxiety, depression, self-harm.

Officer Harold from SAPD said, “We see the last results with the uptick of crime,” when there’s a break in the home, lack of community, father not there. He referenced a shooting in San Antonio during a Fiesta event that left two young men dead as an example of the results of misdirected male youth.

“The schools are just not doing what they used to do,” he added.

We need family strengthening work upstream, Carl said. “Why are we always waiting until the police arrive?” We need to start thinking with our heads about marriage and the father’s presence in the home.

Brad then described the Success Sequence as related to flourishing. If a person gets a high school degree, works full time in their 20s and gets married before they have kids, just 3% will be poor. Education, work and marriage are the pathway to achieving the American Dream.

Married men work longer hours and more strategically. They are less likely to quit a job. Brad mentioned a Minnesota study in which the married man earned 26% more than his unmarried twin brother.

Also, family instability is very expensive. Those who stay married do better financially.

Carl mentioned a Florida study that found it cost about \$200 to keep a family intact. The cost to remediate the fallout from a divorce — thousands and thousands. At some point, we need to start thinking with our heads, he said. We can help 2000 families to avoid fracturing for what we can spend on one child with compound trauma. San Antonio one of the most motivated, family-centric countries in the country.

Carl asked the Founder of Chosen, Jenni Lord, to speak. She’s been involved in foster care for 29 years personally, 15 years professionally. She mentioned a study from a county in California with a major juvenile issue. When they did a deep dive on the cases, every single one in juvenile detention came from a fractured family. What keeps a child in their placement in a foster home would prevent them from having to go there in the first place — family strengthening, she said.

An investigative report in the state of Texas noted we rank 51st in investing in the mental health of our youth but first in business. Every social problem can be traced back to the breakdown of the family. Our posture is reactive rather than proactive. It's a strategy of last resort.

Carl explained TANF was a program set up in the 90s — federal funds are shared through block grants with the states with priority to help families in the upstream. But Texas is using our money to backfill Medicare. Federal policy funded the states wisely, but Texas has \$2000 million sitting around looking for something to do with it. He also mentioned many programs — some pertaining to families and marriage — that are dead files on the Texas books — unfunded and unenforced.

He noted three forms of public policy — protect, promote and renew.

**Protect** kids from predatory policies from technology companies — We're doing pretty well there, Carl reported.

**Promote** — We are not doing well. We are not thinking proactively about how to help young boys before they get incarcerated. Texas tends to be libertarian in its thinking. We need to make help available. Oklahoma leads the nation in pro-active family policy. Go to Oklahoma to see how they do this. Minnesota, Utah, Tennessee and Florida also have good policy. One governor is spending \$70 million on father presence in homes. (was that Florida?) “We have great legislation on the books already — but it's defunded.” Together in Texas, a Texas Healthy Marriage Initiative — they are on the books and doing nothing. Carl has also been trying to help family law judges be more effective, as they are so personally overwhelmed.

Brad asked how we can get more folks happily and stably married. He suggested moving toward a more just model of divorce, with 50-50 custody, suggesting that equal outcomes could make people more cautious about heading into divorce — making divorce more just and less common.

What would we say? Are we making progress in San Antonio on our social challenges? Carl asked. Is there some value held in traditional families? Are we having the crucial conversations? Are we connected?

A man who connected to the Alamo Colleges commented on how they are working to defeat poverty through education — creating a pathway to a high-demand, high-wage job. The Alamo Community College system gives a scholarship to every high school senior in Bexar County that covers the cost of a 2-year, associate degree. You can get a job in cybersecurity with a \$60,000 paycheck with that, he said. “Vocational education that leads to a job that leads to money will lead to a path that benefits families.”

Brad responded with a study in Michigan that showed a similar pathway did not seem to lift the fortunes of young men. It is women who are taking advantage of it. The Alamo Colleges man admitted they have seen the same problem, but mentioned one way they are trying to appeal to men is by hosting meetings that highlight the testimonial of a successful man who shares how his vocational pathway led to a better living. “If the guy who hated school can start to weld or do plumbing or wire a home — now they love school!” he said.

If a man is not making a living, it's very hard to keep a family together, Brad agreed.

The name Sandy Bates in Austin was mentioned.

Large scale social change requires broad connection, Carl said. San Antonio is too isolated. Philanthropy is stuck. We have 8000 non-profits, but half are not funded, are isolated and struggling.

We need leadership to rise up. San Antonio needs a visionary. Who is the visionary leader in SA? When Carl challenged attendees to identify a visionary, no one had a name to offer.

“We need to stop saying Manana and start saying Ahora!” he said.

These problems are being solved in other spaces. Solutions exist and are moving forward in innovative places.

What's been the reaction to Brad's research?

College educated, self-identified liberals have been more skeptical and opposed, he said.

As we grow in understanding of some of the bigger issues, the family piece is crucial. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are declining. We have increased deaths of despair. Many Americans don't have access to the classic American Dream, rags to riches story. Reports of happiness in America are coming down dramatically.

The number one factor to address these problems is marriage and family structure.

If we want to turn the corner, we need to find ways to make love, marriage and family life more attractive and more accessible. It's a multi-pronged effort, Brad said, that includes the “air game” - changing the messaging to young adults and teens.

Address technology issues.

De-segregate social capital.

Equipping and forging families is valuable, Carl said. Ultimately, the work belongs to the Lord. We can go away with the knowledge that we are dependent on the Lord and on each other.