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Boys to Men: A Conference Report

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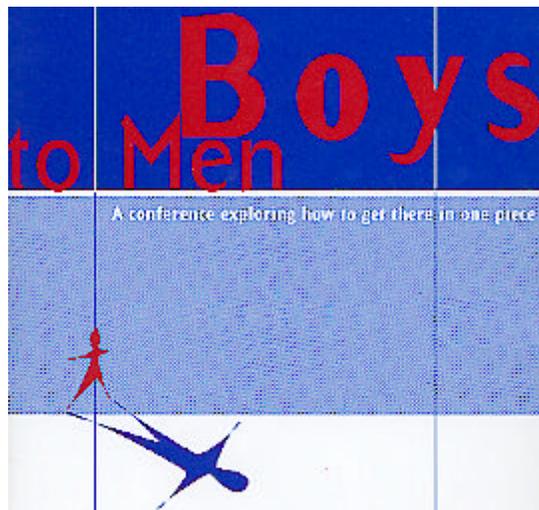
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Boys to Men

A Conference Report
April 2001



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PREFACE

“ We should not assume that an adolescent boy is defective, the problem may very well be that the school, home or others in the community misunderstands the boy’s developmental and emotional needs or is unable to spend the time and effort fulfilling them.”

A Fine Young Man (1998)

During the past several years a number of books and articles have been written regarding the status of boys in our society. Many fear the emotional and social development of boys has been ignored, much to the detriment of boys and the community in which they live.

These fears are reinforced by data which shows adolescent boys as:

- Four times more likely to be diagnosed as emotionally disturbed,
- Four times more likely to commit suicide,
- More likely to be addicted to drugs and alcohol,
- Four times more likely to drop out of school,
- Twice as likely to be diagnosed with learning disabilities,
- Fifteen times more likely to be victims of violent crimes,

As a way of beginning to spend the “time and effort” to honor boys and better understand their needs, leading community organizations combined resources to sponsor the “Boys to Men” conference, held November 3, 2000 at the University of Southern Maine’s Portland campus. Nearly 350 middle and high school aged boys, fathers and male mentors attended. It was the first such conference to be held in Maine. “Boys to Men” was intended to launch a community dialogue about how schools, families and other institutions can better understand, celebrate and support boys in their journey to manhood. There was a special emphasis on the pressures exerted by popular culture in shaping the behavior of adolescent boys.

This report is intended to highlight the event’s major activities and to provide a reference point for future events involving boys and men in Southern Maine.

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A Conference for Boys and Men

In the beginning...

The Conference was held November 3, 2000 at the University of Southern Maine. Over 375 boys and men attended the event with another 200 being turned away due to space limitations. This was the first conference of its kind in the state for boys and men.

The conference represented almost two years of planning and design that was initiated by the Family Violence Collaborative, a project of the Public Health Division, Department of Health and Human Services of the City of Portland. For several years the Greater Portland area had supported a conference for girls and women and the conference organizers believed that a similar event would benefit boys and men. A Conference Steering Committee was formed to coordinate the speakers and workshop and implement a marketing plan. Along with the Steering Committee, focus groups were held in the Greater Portland Area with middle and high school boys to gather their input on topics and activities that would be of interest to them. As a result of the focus groups a Boys Advisory Committee was established to advise and assist the Steering Committee.

The Goals

Many conferences and special events fail because they lack a clear vision or goals. With that in mind, early on the Steering Committee agreed the conference would be designed to support Portland area boys of middle and high school age. Participants would be recruited mainly through schools. The Committee established three specific

goals that helped define the Conference. They were:

- Provide a setting within which boys, along with their fathers or male mentors, could do things they enjoyed and try new things that they had not previously experienced.
- Allow boys to critically examine the pressures and mixed messages they receive through popular culture; messages that can limit the range of their emotional responses, influence their behavior and shape the way they treat others.
- Have fun and celebrate boys in the community.

These goals helped guide the planning of the conference especially the speakers and workshops.

The Sponsors

The Conference was sponsored by an array of organizations and businesses in the Greater Portland community. They included: Maine Medical Center, United Way of Greater Portland, Department of Health and Human Services of the City of Portland, Maine Community Foundation, University of Southern Maine, Spring Harbor Hospital, Portland Press Herald, Men's Resource Center of Southern Maine, Maine Departments of Education, Human Services, and Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services, Day One for Families and Youth, Curtis, Thaxter Law Firm. The sponsor's contributions comprised the majority of the Conference's budget while additional financial assistance came from Satter Charitable Trust, G.H. Bass and private individuals

Welcome

University of Southern Maine (USM) President Richard Pattenaude greeted the conference participants in USM's Sullivan Gymnasium. He told the boys and men that USM was pleased it could host and sponsor this important event. Following his remarks, President Pattenaude introduced Maine's two-term Independent Governor Angus King.

Governor Angus King

Opening Remarks:

"Would you rather be Bill Gates or Arnold Schwarzenegger?" the Governor asked the conference participants. With most of the audience agreeing they would rather be Bill Gates, the Governor highlighted his central theme that power and violence are not the way to become successful. King said that brains are more important than brawn and it is time for boys and men to move beyond the long cherished notion that the use of force offers a shortcut to success. He noted when he was growing up it was "cool" to do poorly in school and it was "uncool" to be smart. King said this stereotype is starting to change and being smart is now more acceptable.

- "Respect is a golden rule—always respect differences."
- "Violence is never appropriate. One of the most important issues in Maine today is domestic violence."

The Governor offered several guidelines for how boys could become good men.

- "Be honest even if it hurts. No one can take it away –you can only give it away."
- "You can miss a lot in life if you stand on the sidelines. Don't be afraid to fail or make mistakes. Erasers are on the end of pencils so that you can make mistakes."
- "Don't be afraid to fail. Regret things you do—do not regret things you didn't do."
- "Sex is never casual—it always means something. Being a father is an 18-year responsibility. Women are not objects—they are people."

Finally, the Governor stressed the point that "boys and men have choices—they do not have to assume traditional male models." He said it is important to be yourself; to find someone to talk with and to love your family and friends.

"Brains are more important than brawn and it is time for boys and men to move beyond the long cherished notion that the use of force offers a shortcut to success."

The Workshops

Things to enjoy and new things to try:

In keeping with the goal of doing things that were exciting and new, the conference offered over thirty-five different workshops ranging from “Winter Camping: in the Maine Woods or in Your Back Yard” to “Songwriting with a Virtual Band.” Workshops took place for one and one half-hours in the morning and in the afternoon. For many boys and men, the workshops were the central part of the day. Several workshops were summarized by volunteers who attended them:

Not all Leaders Were Star Quarterbacks:

This workshop examined the elements of good leadership. Participants were told that because individuals have choices, leadership can be used in either positive or negative ways. During the workshop, it was noted that one of the most challenging aspects of public leadership is working on behalf of people who are not always in agreement with you.

- **Parenting Adolescent Boys:** The workshop leaders facilitated a discussion about the difficulties of being an adolescent boy. It was pointed out that early on, boys are told to be independent and tough. Both boys and men shared their experiences and discussed how to change this image. Several men talked about the importance of encouraging differences and how to be supportive of boys who are exploring new roles. A number of boys talked about the pressure in middle school to conform whereas in high school there is more tolerance for different behaviors.

“This was excellent. We could have used more time.”

- **Growing Up in a Divorced Family:** A mask-making exercise was utilized to help explore the impact divorce and separation can have on boys and young men. Guidelines were offered for men and boys who had experienced a divorce, including that parents should demonstrate respect for one another in front of their children and also make sure not to put children in the middle of disputes.
- **Timber Framing:** Mortice and Tenon Joinery: Allowed boys and men to be actively involved in sawing and chiseling huge chunks of wood. After being instructed on how to join timbers, they had ample opportunity to test their new skills.

The conference also offered workshops on several other topics, including:

- Cooking Good Food
- Staging the Stage
- Cartooning
- Males & War
- Down the Path of Martial Art
- Climbing Wall: When Technique and Grace Mean More than Muscle
- How to Be a Better Athlete
- Your Legal Rights and Responsibilities as an Adult: Good News and Bad News About Your 18th Birthday
- What is a Mentor:?
- Youth Activism: Putting Your Ideas and Energy in Motion
- Down the Path of Martial Arts

“I really learned a lot..”

“The workshop instructor was helpful, engaging and knowledgeable.”

Jackson Katz

The Keynote Address

Being yourself—the way it should be...

Along with the workshops, the conference organizers sought to provide an opportunity to explore different perspectives of masculinity. They did so largely through a presentation by Jackson Katz, producer of the new video “Tough Guise: Violence, Media and the Crisis in Masculinity” and a widely recognized speaker on issues related to boys and men. His work explores the relationship between images of popular culture and the development of masculine identities. Katz used a slide show presentation and an interactive session with the audience to make his points. He also used his own personal odyssey as an example, challenging the audience to develop their own identities and think more critically about what they see on television, computers and films.

Throughout the world, the Marlboro man is one of the most common images associated with being a man. The media creates and continually reinforces male images—images which influence how young men view themselves and how young men present themselves.”

Katz said when he was in high school he was considered odd because he preferred to listen to Marvin Gaye in the lockerroom instead of Aerosmith. He asserted that most people have a public and private self--the public self may be based on the images portrayed through the popular culture and may not represent the “real” person. “The private self may be more representative of the person, but it is not safe to be this person in the public world.” Katz challenged the audience, “to create an environment where the private self and public self are one.”

Katz said ever since “Rambo” we are continuing to ratchet up the images of men in the media as being bigger, tougher and more violent. He said the image of “psycho-man is being created in popular culture;” and if we accept the premise that violence in our society is due to psychomen then we do not have to address the underlying problem-- boys are killing boys and girls. According too Katz, part of the “psycho-man image” is evident when reviewing the type of weapons that men are now seen using. “In the 1950’s movies Humphrey Bogart carried a small hand gun. By contrast, in the 1980’s and 90’s Rambo and Schwarzenegger were carrying huge weapons,” he said. Along with images of bigger weapons, men have been faced with an increased emphasis on being “pumped up.” Katz said, “Every man is in dialogue with himself about muscle.”

Katz also noted that many of the boys who were “shooters” in recent situations across the country had been bullied, marginalized and mistreated at home and at school. “They are acting out their mistreatment,” he said.

In his conclusion, Katz told the audience it was time for men to stop mistreating women and to develop a new vision of being a man. “We need to increase the number of men who are involved in helping young men to have insights into their lives –it is about learning about yourself and not being afraid to begin having that conversation.”

“We are continuing to ratchet up the images of men in the media as being bigger, tougher and more violent.”

Reflections On the Keynote Address

What Boys and Men Had to Say:

Following Jackson Katz's presentation, the conference participants were divided into twenty or so working groups. Some of the groups consisted solely of boys while others were made up of both boys and men. The groups were lead by both youth and adult facilitators. Each group was asked to answer three questions:

- 1) In what ways did Jackson Katz's presentation reflect situations in your life?
- 2) What do you need or want from the men in your life, as you journey from boyhood to manhood? (boys were asked this question)
- 3) What are your hopes for the youth who are here today as they journey from boyhood to manhood? (men were asked this question).

WHAT BOYS HAD TO SAY:

To be listened to and to be heard;

Time to grow up enjoying boyhood and not be rushed;

Respect us for who we are;

Give us the skills to combat negative stuff in popular culture;

Teach us the life skills that will help us succeed;

Live up to your words, walk your talk;

Be a dad first--then a friend;

Offer support without force;

Men need to re-evaluate their maleness; and

Organized conferences like this one.

WHAT MEN SAID THEY HOPED FOR BOYS:

To live in a safe and peaceful world;

Develop skills to combat the negative and destructive element of popular culture;

Learn to feel things other than anger;

Have compassion by loving themselves and others;

Think critically about the media;

Receive better guidance from men;

Believe you can make a difference in the world; and

More conferences like this

And in the End

A Closing Activity:

To give all the participants a chance to see and hear what occurred throughout the conference, a creative and dynamic closing activity. The activity summarized the discussion groups and celebrated the depth and diversity that the boys and men brought to the conference.

This multi-media activity began with presentations by participants in the Graffiti Mural and Hip-Hop workshops. The mural was displayed in the gym and the Hip-Hop participants played a recording describing how the youth and adults in the workshop collaborated on a rap song about being male. Next a panel of youth and adults synthesized the results of the post keynote discussion groups. The panel present key themes identified in each group. The activity reached a crescendo with a slide show of males of all ages, backgrounds and ethnicities. Incorporating photographs of conference participants taken during the photography workshop.

The conference closed with comments about the goals of the day and strong encouragement for participants to work toward those goals in their daily lives

Reflections on the Day...

At the conclusion of the day, boys and men were asked to evaluate the conference and offer their thoughts on the event. Below are their comments.

"It was fabulous." (13 year old)

"I enjoyed the small group discussion with real men and boys." (age unknown)

"A wonderful event." (54 year old)

"I really liked it." (12 year old)

"It was really fun and I'm glad I went to the Conference." (12 year old)

"Good start." (43 year old)

"Keep up the good work." (15 year old)

"Put together very well...will help me in the future." (15 year old)

"I enjoyed the day. Thanks to all who worked to make this happen." (48 year old)

"I loved it and learned a great deal...that I can use when I go home." (14 year old)

"Overall excellent." (17 year old)

"Well organized and quite diverse." (17 year old)

"Thank You." (43 year old)

How to Get There

Next Steps for Boys and Men:

Given the success of the first conference. The Steering Committee is now planning a second conference for the fall of 2001. This conference will incorporate the ideas from last year to offer a more comprehensive and expanded opportunity for boys to become men.

The Mission of the Conference this Year is:

- Honor and support boys in their transition to becoming men;
- Facilitate the involvement of adult males in boys' lives, and
- Recognize and celebrate the many different ways of being a male.

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