HEALTH

Teaching Positive Masculinity

Health advocates are engaging men in sexual assault prevention, challenging the negative aspects of traditional manhood.

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Dean Courtney Robinson leads a session with students (Natascha Yogachandra)

School is out on a Wednesday and the dean of students' office at Facing History High School is full, but these kids aren't here for detention. Dean Courtney Robinson, who has thick arms covered with tattoos and hair pulled back into a braided bun, looks over the room as high school boys shuffle in and out. Some wear sweatshirts with hoods pulled floppily over their heads; others wear navy polos embroidered with a special insignia: tiny hands clasped around a globe.

They chat, complain, and tease one another until precisely 1:35 p.m., when Robinson ushers out the hangers-on while those in the polos plop into seats for a meeting of the Human United Strength Organization, or HUSO. The conversation topics range from rap music to Malcolm X but the subtext always centers on the meaning of masculinity.

"All right, guys," Robinson begins. "Let's check in."

A senior named Devante Moore usually talks about basketball. He speaks faster and faster as he becomes angrier and angrier. Apparently, this year's coach isn't his favorite. John Susana, a freshman, mentions in a mumble that his grades are good, and his small audience claps for his success.

Room 227 is a safe place. One boy shares that his favorite Christmas gift was a hug from his mom. It's a supportive place. Robinson listens intently to the students' problems and responds with short suggestions for nonviolent solutions. It's a male place, a haven for these high-school boys to talk about the things they ordinarily would find difficult to air in public.

They call it the HUSO Mentoring Group, or HMG, an after-school offshoot of the HUSO umbrella organization, which Robinson established at Facing History in Hell's Kitchen. He hopes to see his group replicated in more city schools, even though there are already a number of similar male-oriented clubs operating under other leadership across the United States.

The purpose of these programs is to give boys the chance to rethink maleness, and to change the way men treat women and each other. Moore, the one who always brings up basketball, says that the group isn't for the weak-minded. "This is for people who got strong minds; who are willing to step up to the plate and really become a young man."

Organizers say the construct works once the young men decide to participate. Getting them in the door and then finding the money to keep the doors open are often the two biggest challenges.

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When Robinson started his organization, he did not know he would become part of a much larger movement that has been working for the past 40 years to engage men in the prevention of violence against women. Mentoring for him started at his home in Harlem when he was just a boy. His mother kept the front door open for any child in need, and those who came also looked informally to Robinson for advice. He now tells his club members that they're walking examples of respectful male students, ones who choose conversation over clenched fists.

The first such experiments emerged in the late-1960s and early-1970s during the second wave of the feminist movement, when male activists realized the positive impact of their support in the battle

for women's rights.

Termed "anti-sexists," these men supported the rights of their female partners and initially seemed to be little more than a weak and scattered army without provisions or direction. But after the First National Conference on Men and Masculinity in 1975, structure soon followed, resulting in the establishment of the National Organization for Men Against Sexism.

As gender studies gained credibility as an academic discipline around the same time, some scholars of feminist theory began to develop a new focus, known as masculinity studies. Dr. Ronald Levant played a significant role in the development of masculinity ideology, something he defines as "an individual's internalization of cultural belief systems and attitudes toward masculinity and men's roles."

In 1992, he and his colleagues created the Male Role Norms Inventory, which measures adherence to seven norms of the Western masculinity ideology: Avoidance of Femininity, Fear and Hatred of Homosexuals, Self-Reliance, Aggression, Achievement/Status, Non-Relational Attitudes Toward Sex, and Restrictive Emotionality. Research influenced by Levant's inventory has since revealed that men who embrace more traditional Western masculine ideology are reluctant to discuss condom use with their partners, have less satisfactory relationships, and harbor attitudes that often lead to the sexual harassment of women.

So instead of putting resources into warning women about dark streets and risqué clothing, which unfairly burdens women with assault prevention, advocates for female victims of sexual abuse, such as Lina Juarbe Botella, realize that their primary focus should be on changing the behavior of abusive men. "Women cannot be safe," Botella says, "until men know how to behave."

Tony Porter and Ted Bunch founded A Call to Men in 2002 after being heavily involved in social justice activism for several years. Botella, the organization's training director, said that the two founders "meet men where they're at physically and emotionally," to encourage them to act as positive role models for their communities. But the two men also acknowledge the debt they owe to the women like Botella's predecessors, who came before them as workers for the same cause.

Botella admitted that she originally had difficulty accepting men as partners in the field of female advocacy. But her current focus on prevention has taught her how to embrace their presence.

"I can't take any credit for it, but Tony and Ted had a lot of wisdom on how to be with men, all types of men, from the barbershop to the boardroom. This is really a men's issue," she added. "We need to engage men so that we can ensure a collective liberation."

A Call to Men's mission goes beyond working with men of violence to include community leaders, fathers, brothers, and uncles. "If I have my arms stretched out open to symbolize all the men in our society, a small percentage of them are abusers," Botella explained. "We particularly focus on men who are on the other side, who are on the line, who might stop those jokes or [help] create a society without confrontation." When someone shares a sexist joke by the office water cooler, A Call to Men wants male bystanders to shut it down before he gets to the punchline.

Jamie Utt, who describes himself as a diversity and inclusion consultant, travels around the United States to speak at schools about positive sexuality, bullying prevention, and student leadership.

"I think that we can motivate people to act," he said over Skype from his home in Minnesota, "but it so often comes from a place of charity, you know? We're trying to motivate men to change masculinity for women, but then it's this paternalistic sort of charity versus trying to get men to change masculinity because of their personal investment in it and their relationships."

Utt knows well there are no gold medals or blue ribbons for advocacy work. He said he just wants men to realize the importance of engaging with their partners and responding to their needs. That way, they can help build communities in which all members feel safe, and masculinity is inclusive and not violent.

Carlos Andrés Gómez shares a similar message. He came to realize the negative consequences of most traditionally masculine behavior through a series of shallow relationships, fights with his father, and losses both personal and material. Already an HBO Def Jam poet, actor, and public speaker, he added author to that list in 2012 with his book *Man Up: Reimagining Modern Manhood*. In it, he writes about renouncing his identity as a guy known for liking to pick a fight and then taking up another as a poet—"a journey to becoming a man, a different kind of man, a man who lives and moves and acts outside of the predetermined boundaries of masculinity," he says in the book.

"I mean, so much about toxic masculinity is all about hoping the world doesn't see how hard you're trying," he said. "Whether it's a guy rocking 28-inch rims, or a guy outside of a party with his shirt ripped off, beating his chest, yelling at the top of his lungs, or a guy bragging how big his dick is—it's all about this performance. It's all a performance to hope the world doesn't see that there's a little boy in there who's shaking and scared and hurting."

The topic of privilege repeatedly came up during our discussion—the privilege society confers on men, the privilege society ascribes to being white or sometimes even just appearing to be white, as in the case of the blue-green-eyed Gómez. He prides himself on being able to walk into a room and completely disorient those he encounters. Gómez is well-built; his large shoulders and arms signal days spent at the gym. He "plays up" his masculinity when he walks into a school, "very much by design," he assures me, but when he delivers emotional poems on stage, he leaves tears on his cheeks. Much in the way that Robinson tries to reshape masculinity in Room 227, Gómez does so when he performs in front of an audience. The two men may have different approaches, but they work toward the same goal in safe, private spaces.

Teaching young men to value the models of maleness that men like Utt, Gómez, and Robinson are forging seems to be easier in a room full of strangers than it is in the locker room or at home. Gómez recalled an expression he says he heard somewhere once: "You know, it's like anybody can confront an enemy, but it takes a true hero to confront a friend."

He told the story of a recent trip to Alabama where the men he met represented what he calls "the front lines of the battle" to change the way men think about their masculinity. Gómez says he prefers to speak at a place like this where, by the end of the session, a "pretty homophobic construction worker" was in tears talking about his son. To Gómez, watching that man's transformation in the space of a one-hour meeting is "more revolutionary and more meaningful to me than 30 people who identify as activists" parroting what they already believe.

And those venues have become virtual as well as physical. Online forums have a special appeal because they provide anonymity that gives guys the chance to be curious in private. Blogs like Masculinities 101, MasculinityU, and Higher Unlearning have emerged as equivalents to Robinson's classroom. They encourage young men to debate, ask questions, and learn about new definitions of masculinity.

Twitter and Facebook generate numerous conversations in which postings fling around buzzwords such as "pro-feminism," "healthy masculinity" and "positive sexuality," where male advocates tackle the issues of street harassment and sexual abuse with a keyboard.

Emiliano Diaz De Leon wishes that he had social media when he started working in the field of advocacy. His reach would have been larger, he said, to help educate young boys like himself. When Diaz De Leon was a teenager, he confessed to being violent toward women he dated and said that there had been acts of abuse in his own family. He wasn't aware of the male support group at his high school and was surprised when the school counselor referred him to join after he acknowledged his need for help. Those early experiences led him to the job he now holds as men's engagement specialist at the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault. Although not everyone who comes to be passionate about this kind of advocacy starts because of an early intervention, many do, and he thinks the existence of such groups is a plus.

"I think if we can get men to begin to do the work that early, that absolutely has an impact on their ability to continue doing the work as adult men."

Diaz De Leon became the first children's male advocate at SafePlace, the women's shelter that was his club's sponsor, after having participated in his own high-school group. Plenty of men had provided services to the organization—making repairs to the building and such—but none before Diaz De Leon had volunteered to work with the shelter's clients.

"It was really the women, both the leadership at SafePlace and in the shelter, who took a risk, who both mentored me and challenged me and held me accountable," he said. While some women were receptive to his presence, others had a hard time with it. "They had experienced a tremendous amount of violence from men who looked like me."

He felt the weight of being the first positive male role model to which most of the children had ever been exposed.

"It really forces you, every day, to think about your behavior, language, the way that you walk, the way that you talk, the way that you are around the people in the shelter," he said.

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One afternoon at the meeting in Room 227, the group starts to argue about the value of money. Sentences overlap and the boys grab at any second of silence to

shout out their opinions. As they debate, Robinson listens. He waits for the right moment to jump in and when he does, some of the boys are too involved in conversation to hear him. "Yo yo yo, one mic, one mic," a few call out. It's a phrase used often by the students during meetings to avoid interruptions. The rest stop to give their mentor the floor. Robinson doesn't have to ask for their respect; he's earned it.

"I've had teachers that don't come from the same type of environment as these kids, and they're like, 'Wow, Courtney, how do you do that? You ask them to do something and they do it!'"

It's simple, he says. He doesn't dictate; he explains. When discussion centers on the words "female" and "bitch," Robinson doesn't respond aggressively when a student says that he only uses "bitch" because sometimes "she acts like one." Instead, he puts the word into perspective, asking the boy how he would feel if that word was used to describe his mother or sister.

"Regardless of how you feel about her, somebody loves her," Robinson reminds the student. "And there isn't anything you can say to justify how you're treating her." They listen.

The group's members also know that when Robinson was asked to leave Facing History and become the New York supervisor for Men Can Stop Rape, he turned the offer down to stay with them. This is why: "Me seeing y'all and being here to support you all [to] graduate and move forward and be able to deal with your problems, and help you all make it through and give you all advice means more to me than whatever dollar amount they were going to give me."

"That's love," one of the students says. And the rest clap.

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