

What does it mean to be a man? The Healthy Men and Boys Network of Western Massachusetts seeks answers, plans course for change

By PATRICK HOFF Gazette Contributing Writer Monday, July 20, 2015 (Published in print: Tuesday, July 21, 2015)

A young boy goes into a doctor's office for his annual physical. It's fall, and flu season is coming, so his mother request a vaccination for him.

The boy looks frightened as the nurse prepares the shot, but as she steps toward him she says, "Be a big boy, and don't cry." The boy's mother nods in agreement.

That scenario, described by John Engel, 49, of Easthampton, coordinator for the Healthy Men and Boys Network of Western Massachusetts, is an example of how males are commonly taught to keep their feelings in check.

From a young age, says Engel, males are taught to be "islands unto themselves," without a need for social connection. Telling a boy who has just fallen off his bike not to cry and just keep going teaches him that he shouldn't need anyone's help if he's going to properly "man up," he says. This disconnection leads to poor relationships.

And that is what Engel and the group of representatives of social service and government agencies gathered at Holyoke Community College last month aim to correct.

"There is a problem, an institutional problem in society, which gives too much privilege to men, and not many of us are able to identify our privilege," said Juan Carlos Aguilar, 55, of New England Learning Center for Women in Transition in Greenfield and a member of the network's leadership team. "Instead of doing that, we just take advantage of it, and take more power and control by oppressing others."

Aguilar says he is motivated by his own family: He has two daughters and was raised by a single mother and grandmother.

"My hope is to change the system that keeps oppressing them and give them different kind of individuals in this world."

Setting the course

Over 100 representatives of 60 agencies spent a day at HCC in June to set the course for the one-year-old network to move ahead in its work to change the concept of masculinity to a healthier one. The second-annual Healthy Men and Boys Summit was funded by a number of sponsors, including the Ida and Abram Sudrann Memorial Fund at the Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts which contributed \$5,000.

"Starting to isolate ourselves doesn't serve anyone well," Engel said in a telephone interview later. Isolated men are ineffective fathers and husbands, more prone to violence, and overall less healthy. There's an opportunity here to reenvision what it means to be a man or boy."

The summit included multiple group discussions, a keynote address by Juan Carlos Areàn of New York City, an international advocate on the issue, and a performance by First Generation, a youth arts and mentoring group of Springfield.

During one morning session, participants grappled with defining healthy masculinity, which proved to be a difficult task.

“It’s a working definition, and we know that we will continue to be evolving this,” Engel said. “We know we’re not there. ...” He said the question was posed at last year’s summit, as well as numerous times throughout the year as the leadership team structured the network.

During lunch, the definitions people proposed were hung on the wall to read and discuss.

“Expressing a full range of emotions in a safe, responsible and respectful manner,” read one. “Balancing my socialized tendencies and learning more about how I exercise privilege, said another. “Being able to stand up for our beliefs while treating everyone around you with respect,” stated a third.

In his address, however, Areàn suggested that perhaps “healthy” masculinity is not the right phrase.

“Even though I understand why we use the word healthy, I would hate to be remembered as a healthy man at my funeral,” he said, drawing laughter and applause. “I want to be remembered as a loving, passionate, open-hearted man. And maybe we’re not at a place right now where we can call this the Loving Masculinity Summit, but maybe we can.”

Resource center roots

The network is an initiative of the Men’s Resource Center for Change, a nonprofit based in Amherst, that has supported men in developing healthy relationships and self-awareness since 1981. From the early 1980s through the late 2000s, the center grew and flourished, hosting support groups for men, high school education groups, and intervention groups for abusive men and their partners, as well as publishing Voice Male, a newsletter on masculinity that grew into a national magazine.

Additionally, its members began pursuing other projects across the world. Areàn worked for 10 years at the Men’s Resource Center, and now works with the United Nations, the National Latino Network for Healthy Families and Communities and Harvard University, among other organizations, to promote healthy masculinity worldwide. Steven Botkin, the MRC’s first executive director, moved on in 2004, creating Men’s Resources International, a global organization based in Springfield that has the same objective. Others have advanced to write books on the subject, as well as work with people throughout the country and the world to promote their message.

When the recession hit in 2007, however, donations to the MRC were reduced, and the organization had to rethink serving the community in a realistic way, said Rob Okun, 64, publisher and editor of Voice Male and co-chair of the MRC board of directors. “Like a lot of businesses, nonprofit organizations found the recession had an impact on their financial health.”

The Men’s Resource Center used the crisis as an opportunity to think creatively about its work in the 21st century, he said.

“There were a lot of meetings with board members, former board members, staff,” he said, “and what we realized was that the history and the legacy of the Men’s Resource Center has cultivated the grounds for developing a western Mass network of people interested in a whole range of ideas that we could put under the umbrella of healthy masculinity.”

The MRC held the first annual Healthy Men and Boys Summit last year to gauge interest in a regional network. Engel said people responded with “overwhelming support.”

“What was amazing was that like 125 people registered,” Okun said. “There was representation from all four counties. There were social service agencies, there were social change agents. It was just like people are hungry to figure out a positive way to work with men and boys.”

After this, Engel and the leadership team, including Okun, Laura Penney of Safe Passage, an organization that supports survivors of domestic abuse, and James Arana from Men's Resources International, along with people from 17 other organizations, launched a one-year planning process to set the framework for the network.

"It's been a wonderful experience," Aguilar said. "The people we are working with are a really great group of people, very diverse in terms of race, in terms of age, in terms of gender, and we've been working hard."

Action begins

This year, the network has become more focused, Penney said, as opposed to last year when it was just a concept taking shape.

It has hosted two trainings called Developing Healthy Men and Boys, one for community members and human service professionals and the other for the state Department of Public Health with the Children's Trust, a family support agency of Boston. Over the course of a day, participants discussed the way males are socialized and learned strategies to develop more compassionate boys and men.

The initial training in October had 55 attendees, diverse in gender, race and region, said Engel. The second drew 100 participants. Costs were covered by the agencies.

The sessions, led by Arana, 56, guided participants to examine their experiences with masculinity, pick out things they like and don't like, and develop ways to combat the traits they don't like, Arana said. Some activities included discussions, visual examples of various traits and listening activities, designed to show people are not alone in their thinking.

Arana, who has been conducting similar trainings with Men's Resource Men's Resources International for years, said this work has shown him there is much common ground on these issues. "We realize people around the world feel the same way."

He said he hopes to help guide the western Massachusetts network to becoming "a clearing house for information and best practices," where people can find help and resources.

Reaching out to youth

The network is also attempting to connect with young people to gain their perspective. Arana and Penney led a Youth Leadership Forum at the end of May in which they brought together young activists, ranging in age from 12 to 22, recruited for area youth service organizations, to help them develop leadership skills.

The participants explored a variety of topics, including what it means to be a man and what steps need to be taken to change both individual lives and the broader picture.

"The message is redefining masculinity in a way that is more positive, that is better than we commonly experience," Arana said.

Penney said Engel and the leadership team are developing plans for advocacy within communities and will continue to host trainings in advance of another summit next year.

Interviews with some who attended this year's gathering indicated there is enthusiasm for the network's mission.

"I think that it's made a lot of progress ... and they've been really open to feedback," said Matt Walkowicz, 26, of the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families.

Glorimar Irizarry, 32, of the Holyoke Health Center, said she was impressed with the turnout.

“To be here and see how many agencies are involved, and the work that’s been done by individuals who not only work locally but on the national level or international level is amazing,” she said.

“At the end, there was a sense of energy and optimism,” Okun said. “I think the network’s strength is exactly what it set out to do, which is pulling people together from different aspects of social service and social change, and beginning the work of crafting a plan for our region on what we can do to advance the notions of healthy men and boys.”