Summer 2023

VOICE MALE

Authentic Selves

Celebrating Trans and Nonbinary People and Their Families
FROM THE EDITOR

Passing the Torch

My first job out of college was as a reporter for a daily newspaper. It was 1973. Two decades later, when I arrived at the Men’s Resource Center (MRC) in Amherst, Massachusetts, I had edited two magazines—one promoting alternative energy, New Roots; and one celebrating Yiddish culture, The Book Peddler; and I'd served as publisher of another, Workplace Democracy, which advanced worker-owned businesses.

Joining the staff at a male positive, profeminist, antiviolence men’s center, I didn’t initially know I’d be circling back to magazine editing. I shouldn’t have been surprised, though. When I was 23, one of my early mentors was the night city editor at the daily paper where I was writing obituaries in the afternoon and covering police and fire after dark. “Once you get printer’s ink in your veins,” Steve Pappas told me, “it’s impossible to get it out.” Fortunately, I always liked that inky feeling—it’s like having another blood supply coursing through your veins. That was 50 years ago; I still feel that way.

A lot of people and organizations have played a role in transforming what started out as an organizational newsletter (then called Valley Men) into the magazine you’re reading today, but I’ll always carry a special place in my heart for my family at the Men’s Resource Center, one of the earliest and most wide-ranging men’s centers in North America. The MRC was long a source of inspiration, ideas, and writers for Voice Male.

That family feeling—the camaraderie the MRC staff felt in our comfortable old office—is why I am so pleased that Voice Male will be published by another family, the warmhearted staff at Next Gen Men.

...walls, my moat, my boiling oil, my drawbridge: a man's heart is his castle, mine is secure.... At the end of the poem he writes, “I am scared, frightened...what if I die in my castle all by myself...I think I'll let the drawbridge down.” At its best, Voice Male has always been about both the men trapped behind the castle walls and those who have let the drawbridge down.

Voice Male exists because of the women’s movement. It was born out of women’s struggle for liberation. From off our backs and Ms. five decades ago to Everyday Feminism, Women's Media Center, and Bitch today (to name just a few of our foremothers and present-day sisters), Voice Male unambiguously locates itself within the feminist gender justice movement, a movement that recognizes that not just a publication—but all men—can be both “male positive and profeminist.”

Next Gen Men's executive director Jake Stika and I have been talking about their organization becoming Voice Male's new publisher for a while now, and we’re both feeling energized as we enter the home stretch of our passing the torch to them. I’m excited and hopeful about how they’ll take the magazine to the next level. I hope you’ll feel that way, too. Check out their website, nextgenmen.ca; listen to their podcasts; read their blogs.

To help ensure a smooth transition, I’ll stay involved for a while, assisting them in the ins and outs of producing the magazine. They’re planning on producing their first issue sometime after Thanksgiving. (That’s US Thanksgiving; Canada celebrates the Thanksgiving holiday on the second Monday in October. See, I’m learning already.)

It’s been a privilege to edit Voice Male for all these years. Even when we’ve published painful stories in these pages, they’ve been tempered by articles on the progress we’re making. Men are changing; a new generation of boys is growing up with new models of how to be a boy and a man. Sure, patriarchy is stubbornly trying to hang on. Ultimately, it is an unsustainable model in a world women will lead and one inhabited by more and more “next gen men.”

Next Gen Men staff describe themselves as “champions of hope and workers for change.” When I first read that tagline I thought, “Hey, they must be describing Voice Male.”

Then, thinking about it some more, I realized it was a sign: it was the moment for us—who you might describe as This Gen Men—to pass the torch on to them: Next Gen Men. I’m ready.

Rob Okun can be reached at rob@voicemalemagazine.org.
Receiving the Torch
By Jake Stika

I’m so surprised to be featured here on this page, writing about the future of Voice Male magazine—a future my organization and I are about to play a big part in.

Not because VM’s editor, Rob Okun, and I hadn’t been talking about the magazine’s future for a while now—we have—but because becoming a magazine publisher was never on my vision board when I cofounded the Canadian NGO Next Gen Men almost a decade ago. To be honest, I also didn’t have running a profeminist men’s organization in my plans either. Full disclosure, I don’t have a vision board.

How did Next Gen Men get here?

Jason Tan de Bibiana, Jermal Alleyne Jones, and I started our organization in Canada in 2014 with a strong sense that we wanted to create a new narrative around what it means to “be a man” for the next generation. This desire was born of feeling pain—my own struggles with depression, and the tragic loss of Jermal’s brother to suicide.

Unlike a lot of profeminist organizations, we entered the field through the lens of gender as a social determinant of health, not necessarily through the portal of ending gender-based violence or furthering gender equity. Those ideas came later and are foundational to our work. (I wrote about our beginnings in an article in the Fall 2021 issue.)

However, once you see it, you can’t unsee it. And when we looked under the hood, we saw that traditional masculinity not only dealt boys and men a lot of pain, but also caused a lot of harm. Enter bell hooks, the late feminist writer and thought leader who has been a guiding light in my life. She wrote:

“The first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women. Instead, patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves. If an individual is not successful in emotionally crippling himself, he can count on patriarchal men to enact rituals of power that will assault his self-esteem.” Excerpt from The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love (2004)

Boom. Patriarchy. That’s the heart of the problem. My systems-driven brain lit up.

Sure, we touched some individual hearts and minds through our efforts, but what #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, the fall of Roe v. Wade, mass shooting after mass shooting, and the rise of Andrew Tate indicate to me is that what we actually need is institutional transformation. A culture reset. And the culture is crying out for it with think piece after think piece on male loneliness, an epidemic of gender-based violence, and the growth of problematic (read dangerous) online spaces where men are brainwashed to become purveyors of hate.

In the decade that I’ve been doing this work, the landscape has shifted. Next Gen Men is now able to get into places we didn’t initially imagine we could—from locker rooms to boardrooms, not to mention some rich late-night pub conversations where we go deep, talking about feminism and transforming masculinity. These were breakthrough conversations we previously didn’t know we’d be able to have.

And to keep a record of all this, the profeminist men’s movement needs a paper of record. A trusted curator, convener, and chronicler. Since its humble beginnings as a single-page, typed newsletter in 1983, Voice Male evolved into that paper of record; the activist-writer Jackson Katz describes it as our movement’s Ms. magazine.

Astute readers may have noticed that articles by Next Gen Men staff have been filling these pages over the last few years. In this issue there are two. Later this year, we’ll have the tremendous honor of becoming Voice Male’s new publisher. Voice Male has long been illuminating the way; soon it will be up to us to shine a light on the path ahead, leading to a new chapter in profeminist men’s work—what a tremendous honor.

We’ll be bringing some Canadian flair (watch out for weird spellings of labour, honour, and other Canadianisms), but we promise to continue Voice Male’s history of publishing articles and raising issues that change the way we see, act, and think about masculinity.

I’m grateful to Rob and the Voice Male team for holding the baton for as long and as well as they have. I’m also grateful to you, dear VM reader. I can’t wait to see what we will build together in the future.

That future, I hope, will be one where boys and men will feel less pain, cause less harm, and reap the rewards of positive masculinities, deep and healthy relationships, resilient mental wellbeing, and the peace that comes with true gender equity.

Perhaps we’ll even be able to one day say that men’s dominant emotion is happiness. Wouldn’t that be something.

Executive Director, Next Gen Men
Jake Stika can be reached at jake@nextgenmen.ca
Mail Bonding

Ladies Man: A Profeminist Memoir

I’m writing a book about the three feminists who raised me; the feminists who’ve raised the bar for me throughout my life; and the feminist who, for the last 25 years, has saved my life. *Ladies Man: A Profeminist Memoir* will be informed by scholarly footnotes ranging from “intergenerational trauma” to “post-feminism” and documented with photography. Two of the feminists who raised me are products of Poland’s third feminist wave of the 1870s that produced women like Madame Marie Curie. I’m intending to contribute 50 percent of book sales to HeforShe, the United Nations’ global solidarity movement for gender equality.

Paul Meyer
Chicago

Is It a Boy Crisis or a New Normal?

Regarding the growing male crisis, with just a little connection to feminism guys (“Is It a Boy Crisis of a New Normal,” Winter 2023). Long before we begin thinking about boy/girl brains and role models, we need to first think in complex ways about very real differential treatment of boys and girls from infancy. I feel we are missing out in two ways. We must see how our genetics models are not correct in terms of ability. Second, we must learn to see stress in a new way, one that is made up of… layers of mental conflicts from infancy. [This] takes away real mental energy—from thinking, learning, motivation, reducing reflection time, and hurting emotional health.

By seeing stress this way, we can see much better how the differential treatment boys receive from infancy greatly affects thinking, learning, motivation and mental health, and how this problem increases greatly as we move down the socioeconomic ladder. [This] differential treatment is also causing middle class boys to fall behind their female peers. We must understand the belief that boys/men should be strong and very aggressive…[and receive] less supportive treatment by parents, teachers, and society, is causing us to lose many boys and men in the information age.

We are losing generations of boys—later men—and creating more drug/alcohol abuse, suicide, and violence. I fear this will grow out of control unless we take immediate action to provide much of the same, kind, stable, verbal interaction, and mental/emotional supports…girls are receiving from infancy through adulthood. We must end this differential treatment in the information age if we wish for boys and men to compete equally with girls and women.

Lynn Matthews
Via email

Gender, War, and Male “Disadvantage”

Your article “Gender, War and Male “Disadvantage” has got to be the dumbest piece that I have ever read. Are you’re trying to tell me that if women had more presence in the military, WW2 would’ve been stopped? Do you really have any idea how world governments work? War is inevitable regardless of women involvement. Who would you rather have lead your armies, a woman or a man? These rules were set in place thousands of years ago. Men and Women have clear roles to play in this world. Stop trying to blur the lines. Real Men don’t buy into this bullshit.

Thomas Hearl
Via email (Received in April of this year in response to an article published in the Fall 2017 issue.)

Resources

*Voice Male* maintains an extensive list of resources related to boys, men and masculinities, gender equality, and sexual and domestic violence prevention, among other topics. It can be found on our website at https://voicemalemagazine.org/resources/. If you know of an organization to include, please email relevant information to info@voicemalemagazine.org.
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MALE POSITIVE • PRO-FEMINIST • OPEN-MINDED
Men @ Work

Proud Now, Boys?
Not So Much
By Andy Campbell

Multiple leaders of the Proud Boys street gang were found guilty of seditious conspiracy and other charges in May for their outsize role in the insurrection on January 6, 2021.

After almost a week of deliberation, a jury in Washington, D.C., returned a verdict finding Proud Boys Enrique Tarrio—the gang’s leader—Ethan Nordean, Joseph Biggs and Zachary Rehl guilty of seditious conspiracy, a rare charge historically brought against terrorists on American soil. All were convicted of obstruction charges and conspiracy related to delaying Congress on January 6. A fifth defendant, Dominic Pezzola—the first to breach a Capitol window using a riot shield stolen from an officer—was the sole Proud Boy found guilty of robbery and assaulting an officer.

The trial, which lasted nearly four months, was one of the government’s highest-profile cases against leaders of two extremist groups that flooded D.C. in late 2020 to make their final stand for then-President Donald Trump. Several leaders of the Oath Keepers—a self-described militia—were found guilty on seditious conspiracy charges in January.

After Trump’s inciting “fight like hell” speech at the Ellipse, prosecutors argued, the Proud Boys used the throng of Trump’s supporters massing around them as “tools” to breach the Capitol and ultimately delay the certification of Joe Biden as president.

Messages shown in court between Biggs and Tarrio detailed their desire to recruit more dangerous allies before January 6—which several defendants referred to as a coming “civil war”—as opposed to the rest of the Proud Boys’ rank and file, whom Biggs referred to as “losers who wanna drink.”

“Let’s get radical and get real men,” Biggs messaged Tarrio on December 19, 2020. That quote played a key role in the prosecution’s case. “The Oath Keepers had their rifles. The Proud Boys had their ‘real men,’” prosecutor Conor Mulroe said.

The government often drew a hard line between Trump’s rhetoric and the Proud Boys’ mobilization to D.C., including an infamous moment during the 2020 presidential debates in which Trump, asked to rebuff any of the American extremist factions fighting on his behalf, said, “Proud Boys, stand back and stand by.”

Regardless of Trump’s intent, the gang took his words as marching orders and began stockpiling cash, equipment and recruits to prepare for January 6.

The government secured guilty pleas from multiple Proud Boys in exchange for key testimony. Among them was Jeremy Bertino, a chapter leader from North Carolina, who pled guilty to seditious conspiracy prior to trial. He testified in February that he and his fellow Proud Boys were prepared to forcibly overturn the election if nobody else could.

It’s unclear what chilling effect, if any, the trial will have on the national Proud Boys organization or the growing extremist crisis in the Republican Party. The gang continues to mobilize throughout the country, primarily in response to the GOP’s grievances: Over the past year they’ve held near-weekly rallies at LGBTQ+ events, abortion clinics and demonstrations, and drag queen story hours, introducing violence, harassment, and members of other bigoted factions to otherwise peaceful civic events.

That said, the Proud Boys are facing legal pressure from a variety of sources. Several of their leaders are looking at decades of prison time over the verdict, and separately, some of the defendants and the national organization are being sued for $22 million after the Proud Boys vandalized a number of historic Black D.C. churches in the month leading up to January 6.

Andy Campbell is senior editor at HuffPost, where a longer version of this article originally appeared.
Rising with You, Our Afghan Sisters

As activists struggle for freedom around the world, V-Day recently launched its newest blog series: “Afghan Women Speak: Stories from Inside Afghanistan.” The blog will amplify the stories and voices of Afghan women who can never be silenced as they share the reality of their lives on the ground, V-Day says. They are committed to “rising” for and with the women of Afghanistan as they seek ways to directly help. V-Day noted that, as always, they will place emphasis on local women knowing best what their communities need.

Every day, the rights of millions of women in Afghanistan continue to be violated, stripped and threatened. Women currently have lost access to education, jobs, and multiple other freedoms, such as traveling without a male chaperone and utilizing public spaces like parks and gyms. V-Day is not alone in believing that the women of Afghanistan have the right to education, to travel, to freedom of movement, to jobs, to security, and the freedom to be able to breathe and be.

The first in the series, “We Will Die of Hunger If He Does Not Work,” was released in May. To learn more, go to: www.vday.org/afghan-women-speak.

Campus MENTal Health

Organizers of a new men’s mental health club at the University of Southern California could be a model to help create a safe space where male students can be vulnerable and support one another. Through discussions and activities, the USC Men’s Mental Health Initiative aims to destigmatize men’s mental health in a campus setting.

“Some of my friends who are male have commented to me regarding mental health… ‘I feel weak right now,’ and ‘I don’t want to talk,’ or ‘I shouldn’t be feeling this,’” according to Sam Stack, a sophomore, who founded and serves as president of the Men’s Mental Health Initiative. Other statements, including “I should be stronger,” and “I should be manly,” were among the comments that Stack, a communications major, said he has heard. It was those kinds of comments from men close to him that led Stack to create a program to help break the stigma around men’s mental health, especially in college-aged men.

“If someone’s kind of feeling down, they can come and use this as a safe place… [to] share or just choose to listen and see that they’re not alone,” he said. Will other colleges and universities follow USC’s lead?

Men @ Work

“Misogyny Influencers” Cater to Young Men’s Growing Anxieties

Parents, teachers and politicians are worried about the appeal of so-called “online misogyny influencers” to boys and young men. These influencers post content to thousands of followers in videos and podcasts, offering advice about relationships, mental health and wellbeing, and achieving material success and status. They are believed to be having a negative effect on young men’s attitudes, beliefs and expectations, including about gender roles and relationships between men and women, says Lola Okolosie, a teacher and writer focusing on race, politics and feminism. “I’ve carried out extensive research with young people about sex and relationships for nearly a decade. We need to ask what the appeal of misogyny influencers among some young men tells us about how they feel about themselves, and what it means to be a man right now.”

She also believes we “need to question what it tells us about our society’s failures to take the challenges young men face seriously. There seems to be a vacuum for these influencers to fill.” She says the term “misogynistic” is meant to refer “to clear expressions of outright hatred or dislike of women and girls—but also, more broadly, to the sharing of sexist ideas about both males and females.”

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One of the first scenes in Lucas Dhont’s Oscar-nominated film *Close* shows 13-year-old Léo quietly telling an imaginary story to help his best friend, Rémi, fall asleep. “You end up among the stars,” he whispers, “and it looks a little bit like this.” As Léo breathes softly, Rémi’s eyes slowly close. The next shot shows the two of them fast asleep, curled up together in the same bed, with a band of early morning sunlight stretching across Léo’s small shoulders.

The film lingers in the moment, as if it knows it’s seeing something both tenderly beautiful and utterly fleeting, and it can’t look away.

The film’s story unfolds as Léo tries to navigate the increasingly homophobic regulatory gaze of his classmates at school. He starts pulling away from Rémi, who ends up feeling confused and hurt. Neither of them talk about it.

The film is drawn back several times to the bed as an allegory for the growing distance between the boys. One night, while Rémi is asleep, Léo moves to a separate mattress on the floor. In the morning, he finds that Rémi is next to him again. “Go to your bed,” Léo says. They start wrestling in the early morning light, both playful and increasingly serious.

At one point Rémi hisses in pain. “Why did you bite me?” he asks, clearly taken aback. “Because—” Leo answers. “Go to your bed.”

There is so much unsaid in that moment. They both end up close to tears, facing away from each other with more distance between them than at any point previously in the film.

As I watched this scene, my heart pounded. I wanted to look away, but I couldn’t. It was clear that this was the moment where everything was going to change.

I still remember that moment in my own life. It was during recess in primary school. My best friend R.J. and I were playing, just the two of us, and I accidentally ran into him and knocked him onto the rough asphalt. He lay there for a moment, until a teacher asked him, “Are you okay?”

He answered quietly, “I want Jonathon.”

I felt bad that he had gotten hurt, but I loved the feeling of knowing that my best friend needed me. So, with a clumsy smile on my face I reached down to lift him back to his feet—and he punched me as hard as he could in the stomach.

Years later, I wrote a poem about it that still explains how that felt better than anything else I could write now.

*Do you know what that felt like?*

*It felt like an ocean wave Rising behind my eyes, Because I was surprised, I didn’t know this guy, This boy who couldn’t cry. How did we come to this, That he would need his fists More than he needed Me.*

We drifted apart in the years that followed. And although I had close friends throughout my childhood and adolescence, I never again had a connection like the one I had with him. For the first few years of school, we were one and the same. We touched each other constantly. We breathed the same air. We raced each other outside and challenged each other to playground stunts and pooled our money to buy candy from the local store.

I don’t remember when we started being best friends, but I know the moment we stopped. It felt like a punch to the stomach.

What Rémi and I both experienced stems from the deeply felt realization shared by many boys: that growing up means fitting in with the expectations of what it means to be a *real* man. You can’t be gay, for example, and you *definitely* can’t cry—and you can’t, and you can’t, and you can’t. The rules and expectations feel impossible. A large body of research connects the tenets of traditional masculinity ideology to adverse mental health among boys. Young men in Canada and the United States die by suicide at three to four times the rate of young women, a dire warning about a mental health crisis that comes to the fore in adolescence.

As they grow up, boys become increasingly aware of the narrow definition of what it means to be a man. Subsequent research grounded in boys’ own perspectives has made it clear that their adherence—and resistance—to cultural norms of masculinity forms a critical nexus for their mental health,
particularly during adolescence. Despite the stereotype of boys as disengaged and indifferent, boys are capable of—and largely committed to—resisting masculine norms that are harmful to their well-being. Furthermore, researchers have suggested that the most important location of its resistance and its protective qualities is within boys’ close friendships.

In the 1990s, quantitative research claimed that friendships between boys provided them with autonomy and status rather than intimacy, empathy, or support. This has since been challenged by qualitative ethnomethodological research on the nuanced characteristics of boys’ friendships. Far from being emotionally deficient or relationally detached, boys in voice-centered studies speak about a breadth and depth of feeling within their close friendships.

But adolescence is also where this often changes. Much of this research has been pioneered by developmental psychologist Niobe Way. Her book, Deep Secrets: Boys, Friendships and the Crisis of Connection, was the catalyst for making Close.

“The pattern is that boys, 12, 13, 14, are very articulate about their desire for close friendships,” Way told me. “The clear theme is the desire for intimacy, to share secrets, to be vulnerable with another boy, to have a boy not laugh at them when they’re feeling down. You know, trying to find a friend like that or having a friend like that, and talking about loving them, not being able to live without them...it’s emotionally articulate, incredibly sensitive and vulnerable language that the boys were using.”

As the boys in her research grew older, however, Way noticed that language began to shift. The same boys who had once been so articulate about their close friendships closed themselves off. Where once there had been unhesitating stories of love, there was defensiveness, anger and indifference. But Niobe knew the boys—she had listened to them speak from their hearts for years—so she knew what they had lost.

“They would say ‘I don’t care’ so many times,” she remarked, “revealing, of course, that they very much did.”

It goes without saying that the lives of young people are often shaped at school. School is where young people spend most of their time and maintain most of their relationships with others. Because of this, recent decades have seen an increase in schools’ role in providing youth mental health services and promoting mental wellness. But schools are still not doing enough to help boys navigate their precarious journey to becoming a man, particularly when it comes to the development and maintenance of authentic peer relationships—even though we know how important those factors are for their mental health.

Although there are countless educators regularly going above and beyond, most schools don’t have the expertise or capacity to think about the significance and fragility of boys’ friendships. If you think about it, many schools actively undermine boys’ connections with each other.

Think about the teenagers who post their class assignments on their social media accounts at the start of each new school year, desperately hoping to find out that they have the same class as at least one of their friends. Or the boys in middle school who get told they can’t do an assignment with their best friend, because they’ll distract each other. Or a boy I know who is stuck feeling utterly lonely in a group chat that is laden with homophobic slurs and microaggressive jokes because they’re the only friends he has—because his school never once made it a priority to combat toxic masculinity or nurture vulnerability among its male students.

Each of these examples is indicative of our collective choice to value the status quo more than our boys’ well-being. When boys aren’t offered opportunities to explore what it means to be a man or maintain close connections with each other, they follow the roadmap that they’ve been given by culture at large. All too often, it’s one of dominance, aggression, and disconnection.

In an article published in Issues in Gender and Education, education researcher Debbie Epstein quotes a boy named Michael, who formed a close friendship with another boy in primary school. “We ran off together, holding hands, and all the other people in the class started shouting homo, homo. [...] I didn’t understand what it meant, um, but I just realized that, you know, they were sort of shouting something abusive, and it was obviously something to do with Alan and something to do with us holding hands, so we stopped, and, um, felt quite guilty about it actually.”

Michael shares that a couple of days later, there was a joke going around where male students would go up to each other and ask if they were Homo sapiens. “I just heard the word homo,” Michael explains, “and I thought, no no no, I’m not a Homo sapiens and everyone laughed at me.”

I read that article years ago, but I never forgot its lesson: that to be a man you’re faced with the choice of enduring the merciless teasing of your peers, or the denial of your own humanity.

Either way, it costs your life.

There’s a flower native to the tropical rainforests of Sumatra and Indonesia that only blooms once every few years. It’s so special and fleeting that people buy tickets to the United States Botanic Garden just to see it before it’s gone.

That’s how I felt about Lucas Dhont’s Close. It’s laden with a wistfulness for what boys lose as they become men. Yes, there is sadness there. But we need to do more than just buy tickets to witness its passing.

Instead of an elegy, I want a protest song. When I think of the empty bed between Léo and Rémi, the gut punch between R.J. and me, or the stinging words that brought down Michael and Alan, I find myself willing to do so much more for change. We can’t just lament what boys lose. We have to fight for what they have—and change what we’re willing to give them.

This comes back to parents, the primary protection for growing boys and their closest model for what it means to be authentically connected to others. It lives within schools, where boys learn the script for manhood and navigate their resistance to it. And more than anywhere else, it unfolds in the inner lives of boys: in the unseen depth of their friendships and shared secrets, in the quiet breathing as they fall asleep, in their ability to say the words that are too often left unsaid.

Every now and then, I go back to that poem I wrote about and beyond, my wistfulness. It’s one of dominance, aggression, and disconnection.

This comes back to parents, the primary protection for growing boys and their closest model for what it means to be authentically connected to others. It lives within schools, where boys learn the script for manhood and navigate their resistance to it. And more than anywhere else, it unfolds in the inner lives of boys: in the unseen depth of their friendships and shared secrets, in the quiet breathing as they fall asleep, in their ability to say the words that are too often left unsaid.

Every now and then, I go back to that poem I wrote about the loss of my friendship in the ocean wave of becoming a man. Sometimes I think I’m still writing the ending.

We all are.

Jonathon Reed is Youth Program Manager with Next Gen Men (nextgenmen.ca/), designing and implementing programs and professional development, and providing resources, to engage boys on topics including mental health, healthy relationships and gender equality. He also creates a podcast on the inner lives of boys called Breaking the Boy Code, and hosts Next Gen Men’s Discord server for masculine-identifying youth in Grades 7-9, NGM Boys+ Club.
Looking Back
A Short History of the Antisexist, Profeminist Men’s Movement
By Rob Okun

Feminism is going to make it possible for the first time for men to be free.
—Floyd Dell, 1914

For two generations a growing number of men of all races and ethnicities in the U.S. and around the world have followed women’s lead in working not only to prevent domestic and sexual violence but in redefining and transforming traditional ideas about manhood, fatherhood, and brotherhood. We’ve been called all kinds of names, but many of us describe ourselves as members of the profeminist or anti-sexist men’s movement.

Even though it has been nearly half a century since antisexist men began to redefine manhood, embracing many of the ideas (if not always the label) of profeminism, Voice Male, over three decades, has been publishing a wide-ranging collection of articles, essays, and commentaries that, taken as a whole, reveal the breadth and depth of the profeminist men’s movement: from boys to men and fathering; to male survivors and men of color; GBTQI+ men and men overcoming violence; to men’s health and men and feminism. Woven together, they create a multilayered tapestry revealing a wide, rich swath of one of the most important social change movements many people still today never heard of.

Profeminist men hold the simple “radical” belief that feminism means women and men should each have the same rights and opportunities. Although marginalized and largely absent from the national conversation about gender (and media coverage of same), modern-day profeminist men have been engaged in a sweeping critique of manhood and masculinity since the 1970s. In describing its origins, the National Organization for Changing Men—now known as the National Organization of Men Against Sexism (NOMAS)—uses the phrase “a loose-knit spontaneous social movement.”

In 1975 a group of male students in a women’s studies class at the University of Tennessee, organized “The First National Conference on Men and Masculinity,” not in Boston, New York or San Francisco but in Knoxville. Since that time, groups and organizations have sprung up across North America and in dozens of countries around the world following in the footsteps of idealistic men in their twenties and thirties inspired by the profeminist men’s movement. Many of those early profeminist advocates made important contributions to the burgeoning movement through books including: Refusing to Be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice, and The End of Manhood: A Book for Men of Conscience (John Stoltenberg) and The Making of Masculinities and A Mensch Among Men (Dr. Harry Brod). What may have begun as a kind of “gentlemen’s auxiliary”—providing childcare so mothers could participate in gender equality demonstrations—soon became an inquiry into a panoply of men’s experiences, reluctantly in many cases addressing the elephant in the room: male privilege.

Learning to Speak “Emotionalese”

Despite media messages that lag behind on-the-ground truth, a progressive transformation of men’s lives is well under way. Men’s inclination to become involved in antisexist activism grew out of a sense of justness and fairness heightened for many by men’s involvement in the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s. Those feelings were easily carried over to women’s call for liberation, itself nothing less than a social justice imperative of obvious historical importance.

Still, many men simultaneously felt threatened and envious of women’s groups, women’s politics—the whole women’s movement. Most of us couldn’t keep up. Women’s bilingual fluency—speaking both “Emotionalese” and “Politicales”—certainly made it challenging, but not impossible, for men to understand what was happening in those dizzying times, especially once we relinquished our heretofore unquestioned belief that in the world of gender there was only one official language: “Manspeak” and its evil twin, “Mansplaining.” In those early days, some of us were confused and angry; some tuned out, choosing to ignore multi-racial women’s marches toward liberation. Still, a small number of men began tuning in.

Acknowledging women’s fluency in Emotion-al-ese, haltingly some of us began to talk about our struggles, our feelings, our inner lives. Trouble was, we were primarily doing so with the people we believed could hear and understand us best—women. Slowly, over time, more of us realized (often with a firm push from our partners, wives, or women-identified friends) that we really needed to be talking to were...other men.

Despite the modest number of men involved, chinks in the armor of conventional manhood are visible and, as our numbers grow, the chinks grow larger, threatening to crack open. Since the late 1970s, besides activities in the U.S. and Canada, profeminist men’s work has been ongoing in the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Mexico, and across many countries in South and Central America. In more recent years India and Nepal have joined the growing list, as have some 20 African nations. The roots of profeminist men’s work are deep.
In North America, antiviolence men's centers and men's programs have offered general issue support programs for men, as well as groups for young men of color and GBTQI+ men. Fathers' groups, and a variety of programs for boys on the journey to manhood also are on the rise, as are programs addressing men's health, including male survivors of child sexual abuse. (Groups for men acting abusively, known as batterers' intervention, began in the mid-1970s and now operate in most U.S. states and in a number of Canadian provinces, often overseen by their departments of public health.) There are numerous educational initiatives engaging men in gender violence prevention efforts on college and high school campuses, sports culture and through a variety of community-based organizations.

Profeminist men's activities have ranged from advocacy campaigns, rallies and demonstrations to op-eds and letters to the editor, newspaper and online signature campaigns, books, films and theatre works—all aimed at offering an alternative to conventional masculinities. As time and technology marched on, listservs were created, websites launched, digital publications introduced. (One of the most wide-ranging and comprehensive, XYonline: Men, Masculinities and Gender Politics, has long been maintained by profeminist scholar-activist Michael Flood.) As a sign of the growth of the movement, there are today ongoing collaborations with long-established women's programs across North America and internationally, often through women's initiatives at the United Nations like HeForShe. (V, the activist-playwright and author—formerly known as Eve Ensler—made sure there was a "V-Men" page when she launched her organization's V-Day website.) Today, men are active in One Billion Rising, a global campaign V founded a decade ago to end rape and sexual violence against women.

In 2009, nearly 500 men and women allies from 80 countries met for four days in Rio de Janeiro at a symposium, "Engaging Men and Boys in Gender Equality." Five years later, at a second symposium in New Delhi, the delegates swelled to 1200. (A third gathering in 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, was held mostly online, with some live events in Kigali, Rwanda.)

The growing international movement for social transformation, united under the MenEngage Alliance, now operates on nearly every continent with hundreds of organizational members. Major conferences on related themes of men and women collaborating to prevent violence against women and promoting healthy masculinity for boys and men have been held in recent years across the globe. In North America there are now several each year from coast to coast, in our largest cities and at many of our most prestigious colleges and universities.

Some men found their way into the fledgling movement after perusing the eye-opening 1977 anthology For Men Against Sexism: A Book of Readings, edited by Jon Snodgrass. In the book's introduction, "Men and the Feminist Movement," Snodgrass, a working-class man who attended college on the GI Bill, earned a Ph.D., and moved to California to teach sociology, wrote: "While...aspects of women's liberation...appealed to me, on the whole, my reaction was typical of men. I was threatened by the movement and responded with anger and ridicule. I believed men and women were oppressed by capitalism, but not that women were oppressed by men...I was unable to recognize a hierarchy of inequality between men and women...nor to attribute it to male domination. My blindness to patriarchy, I now think, was a function of my male privilege."


That chronicling was also found in the pages of early profeminist magazines from Great Britain, the U.S., and Australia. Achilles Heel, published in London, began in 1978. M: Gentle Men for Gender Justice, in Madison, Wisconsin (later renamed as Changing Men), released its first issue in 1979. XY: The Magazine for and about Men, came out of Canberra, Australia beginning in 1990. Brother: A Forum of Men Against Sexism, was published by the National Organization of Men Against Sexism.

Although no longer publishing, their contributions to the movement remain invaluable. XY continues as the leading online space for exploring issues of gender and sexuality in men's and women's lives.

Reading these publications today one can see the magazines were recording profeminist history as its practitioners were simultaneously defining the parameters of the emerging movement. Articles ranged from "ERA: What's in It for Men? (M/Changing Men's inaugural issue, Winter 1979-80); "Rethinking Men's Power" (Achilles Heel, Summer 1997); and "Young Men: From Emptiness to Life," (XY, Winter, 1995). Voice Male—which published its first issue 40 years ago as a typewritten newsletter called Valley Men in 1983—situated itself as a brother chronicler of the profeminist men's movement.

A movement that continues to grow stronger.

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Bonobos are living proof that patriarchy is not inevitable.

My recent book *The Bonobo Sisterhood* identifies how the model of bonobo behavior offers a way out of patriarchal violence. While it focuses on forming female–female alliances, please consider it as well an invitation to men to join the Bonobo Sisterhood. Males thrive outside of patriarchy, it turns out. How? Their sexual encounters are mutually wanted and frequent. No lethal violence has ever been observed in bonobos. And males derive their social status from their mothers. What’s not to love?

Our most closely related evolutionary cousins—the bonobos—are peaceful, loving, food sharing, freely sexual, and xenophilic, meaning they love strangers, they do not fear them. Why? Because in their female-led social order, they have nothing to fear. Bonobos open a whole new world of possibilities to eliminate male sexual coercion and, with it, the underpinnings that cause, support, and perpetuate patriarchal violence.

Here’s how it works: If a female bonobo is aggressed upon, she lets out a special cry, and other females—whether they know her, like her, or are related to her—rush immediately to her defense from wherever they are. They form coalitions instantaneously with remarkable speed. Together they fend off the aggressive male, sometimes biting his ear or toe, and send him into isolation. When he returns, in a few days or later, they all reconcile, and he does not aggress again. And here is the most significant takeaway: evolutionarily, bonobos have eliminated male sexual coercion.

This model of collective self-defense changes everything.

I first learned about bonobos from a Harvard University anthropologist, Richard Wrangham, when we were on a panel together in 2004. He explained that primates use male sexual coercion to control females as reproductive resources. For example, male chimpanzees batter fertile females; male orangutans force copulation with lone females; male silverback gorillas commit infanticide, abduct the infant’s mother, impregnate her, and add her to their harem. We humans hear about this violence and consider how brutal nature is, but we don’t question its logic because it fits with our expectation of male behavior. We think of male violence as our legacy, our evolutionary destiny. Bonobos invite us to think again.

It might be that bonobos prevented patriarchy from ever taking hold. They might represent a “pre-patriarchal” social order that stopped violence from becoming the organizing principle of society. And it produced instead a harmonious, peaceful, cooperative, and joyful community. I contend that such a society is not only possible, it is proven by the existence of the bonobos. Bonobos, who share 98.7 percent of their DNA with humans, look very similar to chimpanzees, so much so that they were not recognized as a separate species until 1929. They are found only in the Democratic Republic of Congo and are less studied and less well known than chimpanzees. Nevertheless, the fascinating and developing body of work being done around bonobos reveals possibilities for peaceful coexistence between males and females that we might never have thought possible.

To say I was riveted while learning about our bonobo cousins would be a wild understatement. At that point in my career, I had spent more than a decade as an activist, legal scholar and lawyer searching for ways to end male sexual violence. I had tried to do this through asking audacious questions to expose the underlying...
inequalities of our legal system and social order. “Why Doesn’t He Leave?”, for example, became the title of my master’s thesis at Harvard Law School, challenging the deeply flawed societal expectation that sending women to battered women’s shelters is an acceptable approach to domestic violence. (It is not.) But my new insights learned from bonobos opened a whole new world of possibilities to eliminate male sexual coercion and with it the underpinnings that cause, support, and perpetuate patriarchal violence.

Patriarchal violence is the term I use to describe the amount and type of male coercion necessary to preserve a male-dominated social order. Richard and I were mutually compelled by our respective fields, so we created and cotaught a course on theories of sexual coercion to more fully explore the potential of bonobos to inform human law and society. Teaching this class with Richard gave me the opportunity to test the hypotheses about the power and potential of female alliances to change the world. My book is the result of that inquiry.

That the idea of female alliance was born of a collaboration with a male colleague is not ironic—though at first glance it might appear to be. Female alliances don’t exclude males; quite the opposite. And in The Bonobo Sisterhood, I examine the how and why and invite everyone to join in new coalitionary forces to thwart, once and for all, the power of violence to shape the world. My book is the result of that inquiry.

This sisterhood excludes no one, and all are welcome—as long as they abide by the Bonobo Principle. It is a two-part principle, and if you agree with it, you are part of the Bonobo Sisterhood.

The first part: No one has the right to pimp my sister. With pimp I include any form of patriarchal violence from gaslighting to economic, emotional, physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. The second part: Everyone is my sister. For now, though, we must start where we are, in a world saturated with patriarchal violence.

Every day in the United States, three to four women are killed by their estranged husbands or boyfriends. Black women are at a 40 percent higher risk of being killed. LGBTQ+ people experience intimate partner violence at rates comparable to and even higher than their heterosexual counterparts.

The National Network to End Domestic Violence conducts an annual survey to offer a snapshot of domestic violence in the U.S. On one day in 2019, 43,000 women and children were refugees from their own homes because of domestic abuse and the threat of domestic homicide; more than 11,000 requests for shelter services went unmet.

When I worked as a legal advocate, I once counseled a woman who was in fear of her ex-boyfriend. He instigated a car chase that blocked her in, approached her with a lug wrench, and hospitalized her father who was a passenger. When the case was called, the abuser asked for a 30-day continuance to find a lawyer. The judge agreed immediately, and simply went on to the next case. The prosecutor did not intercede to tell the judge that he had already violated the emergency order of protection and that she was in lethal danger. I was incensed.

This violence is the backdrop of our everyday lives. Part of why we view patriarchal violence as inevitable is that until now we have not had a proven way to eliminate it. We’re taught to rely on laws or law enforcement to protect us. But the moment we delegate our safety to someone else, we give up our power to them. Bonobos show us that uniting with other females and allies, coming physically to one another’s defense in numbers, will shut down aggression. We have a way out.
As biological anthropologist, primatologist and Darwinian feminist Amy Parish puts it: “Bonobo females live the goals of the human feminist movement: behaving with unrelated females as if they were their sisters.”

Society is in this infinite loop—what I call the “good girl trap” of patriarchal democracy. First, notice that the term patriarchal democracy is an oxymoron: democracy is not possible in a patriarchy, which, by definition, is based on male supremacy. Second, we are taught to be good girls, to politely challenge the patriarchy.

Imagine a board game with an infinity loop marked into spaces. Your starting point is an injury from gender-based violence. The injured person might form a small group, and go to the legislature, and there are meetings and hearings and meetings and hearings, and then maybe legislation will get passed. But often by the time it does, it is a shadow of its former self, or has some giant hole through which you could drive a truck.

If it is passed, it is challenged, not because we hate women, but “because women already have those rights,” or “they don’t really need them,” for some reason. Then it is struck down and the player is back at square one, but too exhausted to do anything about it.

I refer to this game as the good girl trap because we are taught to ask quietly for change instead of demanding it in a system that is designed to give us just enough crumbs to make us go away quietly. All that is what’s behind the theory of patriarchal violence. Our system is not set up to provide rights for women, or for women to challenge male sexual violence. We keep going through this infinite loop of patriarchal democracy.

Or, we can get out of it and say: “They’re not coming to help us. The system’s not coming to help us, law enforcement is not coming to help us. And if we’re Black or brown or indigenous, they won’t even answer our call.” So, we have to come for one another, to be stronger together, we must confront the problem. We must understand that the problem isn’t that of an individual woman in individually bad circumstances. Nor is it the problem of any single state or nation.

The world of abusers is the problem. In recognizing that truth, we recognize something fundamental: that this is a problem for an army of women to solve.

The world of abusers gets top-of-fold, page A1 coverage; the ubiquitous terrorist reign of men against women barely makes the paper.

—Diane L. Rosenfeld

Abusers: The Original Domestic Terrorists

Every day the U.S. domestic violence courts are filled with women in an abject state of terror. Every day, judges hear case after case concerning men threatening violence to women they view as “theirs.” It is so common, so ubiquitous, so woven into our everyday existence that nearly all of us accept these assembly-line courtrooms, society’s tepid response to domestic violence, as natural and sufficient. We have lost the sense of urgency presented by this form of domestic terrorism. Their existence, with the long queues of terrified women, testifies to a system that routinely fails to provide a comprehensive safety net for endangered women by holding the abusers accountable.

In one case in which I was involved, the abuser had already broken into the woman’s apartment, so she did not feel safe there. A court advocate hoped she’d have “luck” to find space in a local battered women’s shelter.

I represented the chief legal officer for the state of Illinois, and this was the best that I could do for this citizen? The system had just allowed a dangerous criminal to freely roam the streets while I was hoping to put this woman into hiding. How in the world did we get to this place? How was I complicit? What could possibly be done?

I now have answers. But at that moment, what I knew was that the United States has built and staffed specialized courtrooms filled with terrorized and terrified women desperately pleading for protection from their intimate partners. And, rather than provide them with any meaningful help, our system is set up to make it their own responsibility to keep themselves safe.

To be stronger together, we must confront the problem. We must understand that the problem isn’t that of an individual woman in individually bad circumstances. Nor is it the problem of any single state or nation.

The world of abusers is the problem. In recognizing that truth, we recognize something fundamental: that this is a problem for an army of women to solve.

The overwhelming majority of sexual violence goes unremarked upon until it turns into a lawsuit or a murder. And when stories of sexual violence reach the media, they are treated as something remarkable, sensational, conveyed with an air of shock and resignation. The murder is reported; the underlying, escalating violence seldom is.

But domestic violence homicide is so predictable as to be preventable. It is by far the most predictable type of homicide. We know who the intended victim is. We know that the motive is to control her and prevent her from leaving. We know that immediately after leaving an abuser is the most dangerous time for a woman—and her children—and that her partner’s abuse will become more frantic, more violent, more desperate. We know this well enough by now to expect it.

We are resigned to expecting an intimate partner to be the perpetrator. Never does an article call for intervention and action at the first signs of abuse. The rare tracking down of foreign terrorists gets top-of-fold, page A1 coverage; the ubiquitous terrorist reign of men against women barely makes the paper.
like bonobos—whether we know each other, like each other, hate each other, or are related to each other.

A new concept of equality

In my book I talk about a new vision for equality. We always think about equality in terms of women's equality to men, where we use men as the standard. What happens when we shift the lens and think about equality among and between women, as a starting point—that all women are created equal? That we can share our resources among ourselves? That is a radical way of looking at equality—and untapped, because patriarchy depends on the division of women against each other. Let’s get over artificial divisions between women and realize that what unites us is so much more important than what divides us. I am eager to see what will transpire from this different lens on equality.

Magical things will happen when women realize the power of defining resources on their own terms and sharing them amongst others.

How does the law and legislation play a role?

Although I teach at Harvard Law School, I have very little faith in the law, especially in its enforcement, to protect women from sexual violence. I’m more hopeful about the power of coalitions among women—even informal, quick coalitions to protect women and put pressure on the system to enforce laws that we already have, that are unenforced.

In terms of law, I would require that every law enforcement community has a high-risk case management team—mandatory danger assessments—and a way to identify and track high-risk cases to prevent domestic violence homicide. In my opinion, it must be a two-track effort: 1) demand enforcement of laws on the books and 2) create new frameworks on equality enacted through unprecedented female coalitions.

A pastor in Baltimore contacted me because she was concerned about one of her congregants and asked if I could help. She was in danger, and no one was listening to her. “I’ve been working closely with this woman, whose estranged husband is actively threatening to kill her. Nobody’s paying attention. I wrote to the police commissioner, and instead of calling it ‘domestic violence’ in the regard line, I called it ‘active terrorist threat.’”

Then I was in Chicago visiting my mom. The front page of the paper carried a story about a murder-suicide in Buffalo Grove, Ill., where the man killed his two young daughters, his wife, and his mother. I wrote an op-ed published in the Chicago Tribune headlined, “When we treat domestic violence as a private affair, we are culpable in perpetuating it.” It offers a glimpse of how what I call the Bonobo Sisterhood Alliance concept is crystallizing. In both these cases, the system treats domestic violence as an everyday occurrence about which nothing much can be done. But what happens if we treat it as the terrorist threat that it is?

In my book, I question a system set up on the premise that “she” will leave. “Why doesn’t she leave?” we ask, because our response to domestic violence is to let law enforcement off the hook and to expect her to go into hiding at a battered women’s shelter.

I want us to think about the injustice of this situation. And to use the power of groups of citizen-allies to compel law enforcement to hold abusers accountable and support victims by keeping them safe. In 1994 I said this kind of violence is so predictable as to be preventable. And nearly 30 years later, I’m still saying the same thing.

In terms of legislative changes, I propose that we treat all domestic violence cases as potentially lethal. Separate the ones that are. Have a coordinated community response around those cases. Hold the offenders accountable. Let the women stay safely in their homes. Rocket science? Not at all.

The Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center in Newburyport, Massachusetts, for example, created a High Risk Team Model that is highly effective at preventing intimate partner violence from escalating into homicide. I was part of the Greater Newburyport High Risk Case Management Team when it started in 2004.

A former student of mine, Maclen Stanley, and his wife, Ashley Ruggles Stanley, posted an amazing TikTok about the book. At the end of it, Ashley asks: “What if, when she goes to the police station, instead of going alone, she has five allies with her. Would the police take her more seriously?”

Law won’t protect women; we have to protect one another. That’s the Bonobo Sisterhood. It is very easy. Just show up.

Diane L. Rosenfeld, JD, LLM, is the founding director of its Gender Violence Program.
I was privileged to interview the remarkably kind, fierce, brave, and delightful people featured in Authentic Selves and help get their words and images in front of you.

I come to my role in putting together Authentic Selves as a 75-year-old bisexual and queer cisgender woman and as the mother of a nonbinary 35-year-old. Despite the many relationships I’ve had with trans, nonbinary, and genderqueer people throughout my life, I still feel like I am an aspiring ally, learning as I go. I picture you, dear readers, as a gorgeously varied community of people who are also lifelong learners about yourselves and the people you love.

I’ve dedicated much of my work life as a journalist to Family Diversity Projects, the national nonprofit organization I cofounded 30 years ago with photographer Gigi Kaeser. Our mission has been to fight prejudice, bullying, and violence by helping to teach children, teens, and adults to respect all people without exception. To do this, we created eight traveling phototext exhibits about marginalized groups, including trans and nonbinary people, which have been shown in thousands of schools, colleges, libraries, museums, workplaces, and houses of worship nationwide. Our most well-known exhibit, Love Makes a Family: Portraits of LGBT People and Their Families (also published as a book), was the subject of a federal lawsuit in 1995 after some parents tried to prevent it from being shown at our local elementary schools. One sixth grader who finally got to see the exhibit wrote in the guest book, “We’re all created equal!!! Remember???”

Clearly, a huge number of people still don’t remember or live according to this core statement in our US Constitution. While I’ve been working on Authentic Selves, horribly transphobic and homophbic bills have been passed or are on the path to becoming law in many states in our divided nation. All over the country, books about LGBTQ+ people continue to be removed from school libraries and classroom shelves. Sadly, I can easily imagine that Authentic Selves may join the ranks of banned books.

I spent the past year interviewing the trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming people and many of their biological, adoptive, and chosen family members that you will meet and get to know in Authentic Selves. I don’t think I made it through any of the interviews without crying at least once—often due to the descriptions of pain, discrimination, bullying, and violence many of them had faced, but more often due to stories of healing, transformation, joy, and triumph made possible by authenticity in the face of immense challenges.

This book is coming out at a time when the increased visibility of trans and nonbinary people has resulted in increased violence and incendiary political rhetoric. It is more important than ever for trans and nonbinary people to be recognized and celebrated in their full authenticity. I’m grateful to everyone who agreed to share their story to help counter these violent political narratives and to offer representations of families who fully embrace the authenticity of their trans and nonbinary members.

I continue to hold on to hope that this world will someday be a safe and welcoming place for all people. Although I suspect that Authentic Selves will not lose its relevancy for many years to come, my most fervent hope is that someday—in the not-too-distant future—this book will be valuable because beautiful depictions of beautiful families are always inspiring but won’t be needed in the same ways that they are now. I try to envision a world where every person can come into their own understandings of their authentic selves without fear of what that revelation might do to their relationships and their ability to navigate the world with safety and joy.

For now, I urge you to look into the eyes of these magnificent human beings and read their words. Breathe in the love and wisdom they are offering you. Know in your heart the truth that all people are created equal and that all people are worthy of being celebrated. Period. No exceptions. Then go out and make that fact guide all your actions.

—Peggy Gillespie

Peggy Gillespie (she/her), MA, CSW, is the cofounder and director of Family Diversity Projects, and editor of all of the organization’s exhibits and books, including Love Makes a Family: Portraits of LGBT People and Their Families (www.familydiversityprojects.org).
Ben and Bedaura Haseen
Ben Haseen
(he/him)
Medical student, transgender health care activist, researcher

I’m twenty-five years old, and I think I’m the only Bangladeshi American Muslim transgender medical student in the United States. I was born with my identical twin sister, Bedaura, in the city of Dhaka in Bangladesh, and our younger brother came along a few years later. My sister had a learning disability growing up and because of limited resources in Bangladesh, she couldn’t continue her schooling. My parents really wanted Bedaura to go to elementary school, so they decided to immigrate to America.

When we moved to the United States, we lived for four years in Queens, New York, in a neighborhood where there was a lot of gun violence. After someone was shot right below our apartment window, my mom had had enough. When I was around nine, my parents packed their bags and we moved to Georgia. My mom has never felt comfortable working in the United States because of the language barrier so she stays home. I think her English is great, honestly, but she feels very nervous talking to people in the outside world. My dad was a taxi driver in New York City, and in Georgia he drives for Uber. Our family has lived very simply in blue-collar neighborhoods throughout our entire lives.

Around the time we moved to Georgia, I started having crushes on girls. I was assigned female at birth, and I wasn’t interested in boys like all my other friends were. When I was around ten years old, I learned what it meant to be a homosexual and to my dismay I started to think that maybe I was a lesbian. I had a great deal of internalized homophobia because my Muslim faith and the culture I was raised in told me that I shouldn’t accept gay people.

While I was growing up, I always dreamt that I was a boy and never felt comfortable wearing girls’ clothing. When I got my first menstrual cycle, it was psychologically traumatic. I know that most girls don’t enjoy having a period at first, but for me, it felt like I was dying on the inside. I never put two and two together until, many years later in college, I figured out that I had been experiencing gender dysphoria for a long time.

In my last year of middle school, I realized I had to stop escaping from my feelings and acknowledge my attraction to girls. I started coming out as a lesbian to my closest friends and all of them took my news well. They all said that although it was surprising, they accepted me for who I am. When I came out to Bedaura, she said, “I love you for who you are, and that’s it.”

Unfortunately, Georgia in the early 2000s was not the most accepting place for queer youth, and as more people in school heard about my sexual orientation, I started getting bullied a lot, verbally and physically. I was still closeted with my parents, and my life at school continued to get worse to the point that I was suicidal.

I knew I couldn’t talk to my family, and even my friends didn’t really understand what I was going through. I was close to one counselor in high school, but I didn’t know if she liked LGBTQ+ kids. I took a chance because I was so desperate and knocked on her door. I was crying and I told her everything that I was going through, and thankfully she was incredibly kind and accepting. She became my guardian angel! I’m incredibly grateful to her. Finding that one person saved my life.

At sixteen, I was volunteering at a local public library and one day a little girl around six suddenly came up to me and just stood there. Without warning, she smacked me on the middle of my chest and yelled, “Why do you have breasts?” It was kind of hilarious. This child was rude to me and hit me, but for some reason, I was oddly appreciative of her. I felt like it was the first time anyone had ever given me a gender-affirming gesture.

Around that time, my mom went through my phone one morning, and she found out that I was talking romantically to another girl and confronted me about it. I was in such a low place in my life that I just gave up and told her I thought I was a lesbian. My mom didn’t take it well and basically told me I had to go back in the closet or else! She even mentioned conversion therapy, which really scared me because I had heard a lot of scary stories about that. I ended up going back in the closet, and I was miserable again for another two years.

Finally, when I turned eighteen and went away to college, so much freedom came into my life. I began to explore myself and relationships, and that’s when I first started to build my queer community. I had my first long-term relationship with a woman, and as I got more and more comfortable in my skin as a lesbian, I began to realize that it wasn’t just my sexual orientation that was different, but also my gender identity. I discussed my gender questions with my then-girlfriend, and she was super accepting. She told me, “If you are trans, I’m going to support you all the way.” Even though our relationship as a couple ended, I’m incredibly grateful for her understanding and kindness during that pivotal time in my life. She pushed me to go see a therapist, get a gender dysphoria diagnosis, and start hormone replacement therapy.

When I started my medical transition, my mom started to notice my physical changes. Six months into my transition, I sat down to talk with her. She said, “When you were growing up, you were always such a miserable kid. You never smiled in photos. You would cry almost every day. Now I see you are smiling. You are happy. You have so much to live for and you have so much passion in you.” My mom realized that I was a much, much happier person being who I truly was. She said she was sorry for what she had put me through when I first came out as a lesbian. (And my mom almost never apologizes for anything!)

I thought my dad was going to be the harder one to crack because he’s a very traditionally masculine man in a lot of ways. But when I came out to him as trans, he said, “Well, it’s weird, but I will learn to adjust.” My brother and sister have always been very supportive. They’ve really been my backbone, and they helped me have the courage to come out to my parents. Of course, it was hard for my sister to rewrite herself to think she has a twin brother instead of a twin sister. She had taken it much easier when I had first come out as lesbian. Bedaura and I looked exactly alike up
until we were about thirteen, and then we started looking a little
different. Of course, people assume we are fraternal twins now.

At this point, my whole family here in America has accepted
me, which makes me feel so hopeful. And surprisingly, my family
in Bangladesh accepted me even faster than my family here. As
people get more and more exposure to what it really means to be
a trans person, most people realize that we are not a threat.

While I was in college, I was also doing a lot of research trying
to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. I got a job working
in a research study at Grady Hospital, the largest trauma hospital
here in Atlanta, interviewing men who had lived through trauma-
matic pasts. One of the men I was interviewing told me about
his early sexual trauma and then he said something that changed
my life. He told me, “You’re the first man I’ve ever felt comfort-
able sharing so much of myself with. I really hope you become a
physician.” His statement was the catalyst that led me to pursue
medicine as a career.

Around the same time, Bedaura was diagnosed with
lupus and was in the hospital for about a month. She had some
good doctors, but she also had some terrible doctors who were
incredibly mean to my parents because they were immigrants
and didn’t speak perfect English.

The experience of seeing these
doctors talk down to my mom
and dad made me feel like I had
a responsibility to become a good
physician who would make all
people comfortable.

I chose to go to Morehouse School of Medicine here in Atlanta
and during my first year of medical school, I began my medical
transition. I’m in my third year now, so I’m almost three years into
my transition and I live fully as a trans man. My entire medical
school class has witnessed my transition up close, and since then,
I’ve been doing a lot of advocacy work about being a trans man of
color in the medical system, both as a provider and as a patient.

I’ve had so many trans immigrants message me on social
media and say things like, “I’ve never felt validated by someone
in the medical field until I found your social media profile and
saw the work that you are doing.” I’ve started a YouTube channel
where I talk about being a trans man and discuss the importance
of easy access to medical knowledge for all trans and nonbinary
people. I’ve also been able to connect through Twitter to a bunch
of trans medical students around the country who are doing the
work of changing medical curricula. Right now, I’m working on
a podcast about making trans health care knowledge accessible
to all med students. We are collectively working together to make
medicine more inclusive.

I’ve given talks about transgender health needs at Emory
University School of Medicine, where I received the huge honor
of leading grand rounds—something that’s almost never done by
a medical student. Usually, grand rounds are led by a physician
who is an expert in one field, and they teach other physicians
in other fields about their work. I was also invited to the South
Asian American Policy and Research Institute to talk about the
health disparities of being South Asian and transgender in the
American medical system. I recently got asked to be a reviewer
on an LGBTQ+ health article for The Lancet. It is one of the most
recognizable scientific health journals in the world! I’m finally
being recognized for my expertise in this field.

When I was growing up, I didn’t have anyone to look up to
and I definitely did not know any trans doctors, so it is my goal to
continue to be visible regardless of what I’m going through at what
time in my life so that other people can know that this is possible
and something that they can strive for.

Most of my classmates have been super supportive. Many of
them immediately started using my correct pronouns, but there
have been a small handful of students who have said awful things
behind my back. One student told another classmate that I’m just
a girl pretending to be a boy. I confronted him and told him he
can’t say those kinds of things, especially as a future physician. He
took it well and apologized. In fact, he felt incredibly guilty, and I
think he took the criticism to heart.

I don’t usually tell my patients that I’m trans, but I wear two
pins on my white coat—one is the trans flag pin and the other has
my he/him pronouns. If the patient is queer, they immediately
open up to me. If a patient doesn’t know what the pins mean and
doesn’t mention them, we just go on with the exam. I haven’t yet
felt the need to come out to any of my patients, but I imagine
I’ll do that at some point in my career. One queer woman came
into a vaccination clinic looking incredibly nervous because
she was afraid of shots, but her fearful expression turned into a
smile and her eyes brightened up when she noticed my pins. It was
great that this patient felt better knowing I was queer friendly.

For the last two years, I
have been invited by the Health
Careers Opportunity Program
Academy at Morehouse School
of Medicine for Black and brown
disadvantaged future medical students to teach body diverse
and gender inclusive applied anatomy! Teaching is one of my passions
and I love the opportunity to show off being Professor Ben! And
the best news, I just passed my last licensing exam for medical
school! Dr. Ben Haseen coming soon in 2023!!

On a personal level, after my first long-term relationship
ended, I wanted to find community. I was the only trans person I
knew, and I was also the only trans Muslim South Asian person
I knew about. When I searched online for “transgender Muslim
Americans,” the name Feroza Syed showed up. I found out that
she also lived in Atlanta and was an activist—what a small world!
I immediately went to a talk that she was doing about bisexual
health, and as soon as I showed up at the event, Feroza and I
locked eyes. It was almost like a fairy tale. We were the only two
South Asian people in the room, and I just looked at her and she
looked at me and we smiled. After the event, Feroza introduced
me to many other LGBTQ+ Muslims. That’s how I reconnected
with my religion and my ethnic community.

Working with Feroza to do community building with queer
LGBTQ+ Muslims and South Asians has really reignited my
passion for being an out and proud trans South Asian American
Muslim! As I’ve started to come out within the more traditional
Muslim community, people are getting to see me as the person I
am, rather than seeing me as a sinner. I believe that they are slowly
coming around.

Because of my online advocacy work, I get a lot of death
threats and I’ve had terrible things said to me. I’ve even been
called a child molester because I’m trans. As a brown Muslim
trans man, I worry about my safety, especially at airports. TSA
always goes through my bags more carefully, and when I go
through the scanning machine and the TSA folks don’t see male
body parts, they often start asking me a lot of questions.

“I made a conscious effort to be very upfront
about my gender transition from female to
male in medical school because a lot of trans
people in my community say that they
haven’t really been treated well by the
medical system. I wanted to expose the next
generation of doctors to what it means to be
a trans person and to the fact that we are all
deserving of respect and good care.”
There is so much violence directed at trans women of color, especially Black trans women. One of my neighbors, a transgender Latina woman who lived two miles away from me, was murdered recently right outside her apartment. I want to help in some way to make the world safer for BIPOC trans people.

My advice to younger trans and nonbinary kids is to find your people. Those people don’t have to be physically present to be there for you. There are so many wonderful groups available now. There’s one group called Desi Rainbow Parents that is an inclusive LGBTQ+ group for South Asian kids. There are even a lot of very good children’s television shows that are trans inclusive, like She-Ra and the Princesses of Power. I’ve watched all the episodes, even though they were made for children! She-Ra has positive trans and nonbinary characters, which is amazing to see. When I was ten years old, where was She-Ra?

I will continue to fight for the rights of trans kids everywhere and I will always have their backs. When I was growing up, I didn’t have anyone to look up to and I didn’t know any trans doctors, so it’s my goal to continue to be visible regardless of what I’m going through in my life. When people ask me what I want out of my life, I have a simple answer. I want to be remembered by my patients when I’m no longer here. I want them to say, “Ben was a kind doctor and he cared about me.”

Bedaura Haseen
(she/her)
College registrar’s assistant

My identical twin sister is now my twin brother, Ben. He is five minutes older than me. When Ben and I were little and throughout elementary school, we wore matching clothes all the time. We used to play together with Barbies but at the same time, Ben wanted short hair and to wear jeans, not dresses. My mom was good with him and let him cut his hair short and wear the clothes he preferred. Our classmates and teachers didn’t have any trouble telling us apart because Ben was always the gifted student on the honor roll, and he dressed like a boy. Ben was kind of an ideal kid. I was in the shadows and most people only knew me because they knew Ben. I always had to compete with Ben, but now I’m so grateful because the competition helped me push myself to succeed in school.

Not many Muslim scholars speak about transgender people. I know in Bangladesh there are a lot of transgender people, and they are accepted. When Ben came out, everyone in our family here and in Bangladesh accepted him. My dad’s family is from a small village where they don’t even have electricity and they accepted Ben! What I do know and believe is that everyone should be happy about what God gave them. I truly accept that idea. Right now, it’s hard for me to drive because of my slow reaction time from my health problems and I could be unhappy because all my friends are driving. Instead, I say, “This is what God gave me. Maybe there’s a good reason for me not to be driving.”

Ben is always busy with his medical school, and we don’t talk much when we are apart, but when we get together, we have a great time. Sometimes we go hiking or dine out or go to museums together. I’m happy for the work Ben is doing right now, especially his advocacy work. I have faith that he is helping a lot of people already and I am positive that he will be a great doctor in the future.

Ben has an immense amount of positive heart, often more heart than someone who is praying all day. For example, if you compare a Muslim woman who wears the hijab but doesn’t fulfill the five pillars of Islam—which include charity and submission to God—to a woman who doesn’t wear the hijab but does fulfill the five pillars, you can see that being a loving person is the most important thing in life.

In my final year of college, I came out to my best friends that my twin sister had transitioned and become my brother, a trans man. One friend who also follows Ben on social media said, “There’s nothing wrong with that. I still love you and if you need anything, just call me.” In fact, all my friends thought it was cool and they are all very supportive of Ben.

I don’t miss having my twin sister because when Ben transitioned, I didn’t lose my sibling. I didn’t lose Ben! When we were both girls our parents were more protective of us when we went out just because we were both girls. Now I can go out more freely. When we were both girls, day trips were fine, but now I can plan an overnight trip because Ben will be with me.

The thing I admire most about Ben is that he seems like a tough person on the surface, but underneath it all he is really kind. If he gets mad at me, the next day he’ll buy me a box of chocolates. He’s got one of the softest hearts I know, but you really must know him to know that.

When Ben came out, my mom was nervous because there are hate crimes all over the United States, even in liberal states. Now that Ben is doing advocacy work, Mom will say, “Why is Ben trying to be so public like Bill Gates?” Other than that, my mom is less concerned with Ben being transgender, but she’s concerned that he has distanced himself from the Muslim faith. I try to comfort her, as there is a verse in the Quran that says that whenever God wants someone to have faith, they will have faith. God probably wanted me to have faith, so I accepted Islam fully. Maybe it will take Ben more time. God doesn’t just give faith to you—you must work for it.

When Ben first came out to our mom, I was right there. Ben called and told her, and Mom cried and asked him a lot of questions because she was curious. She said, “What is happening with my daughter?” Then Mom and Ben decided they were going to tell my dad on the weekend when Ben was coming home for dinner. My mom tried her hardest to keep the news in, but she just couldn’t and she was crying when she called my dad to tell him about Ben. My dad was a very strict father, so I was nervous about how he would react. Instead of being upset, to my surprise, my dad was laughing and happy. He called Ben, and they had a good conversation. There has been no conflict between my dad and Ben about him being trans. My dad then called all his relatives in Bangladesh and started telling them, and they were all accepting.

Love and support are the most important things anybody can have; it’s important for everyone to love their trans family.
members. In India there are a lot of trans people who are looked up to as they embody the two spirits of female and male joined together. As far as my relationship with Ben, God taught us how to love all people. It’s not for me to judge anyone. The only person in the universe who can judge is our creator.

I love Ben as my brother just as he is. Being trans has never changed our love and never will. We will always be twins.

Jozeppi Angelo Morelli and Chris Mohn

Jozeppi Angelo Morelli (he/him)
Retired state police investigator, activist, public speaker

I'm a retired New York State police investigator and federal agent, and I was a first responder at the World Trade Center disaster on 9/11. I currently live in what I call rural white America, in Sedona, Arizona, which is on the sacred soil of the Yavapai-Apache nation and the Hopi tribe.

I was raised as a girl with white privilege by white adoptive parents in a traditional Italian Catholic home in New Jersey. On May 25, 2021, I underwent gender-affirming surgery at the age of fifty-four. I had always felt awkward in my body as a kid, but I thought it might be because I was a transracial adoptee. I gravitated more to traditionally male sports rather than the sports that girls were allowed to play back then. I focused on being the best athlete I could be and spent very little time connecting with other classmates except in sports venues.

I knew in sixth grade that I liked girls, but I didn’t have words for those feelings. Only boy/girl relationships were talked about in my school. It wasn’t until college in the late ‘80s when a female friend handed me the book That’s Not What I Meant! by Deborah Tannen that I began to understand myself. Most of all, I recognized how much I thought like a man. I still had no language or idea what transgender was, so I concluded that maybe I was a lesbian. I had hidden relationships with women and fake relationships with men to satisfy my family.

I lived as a lesbian for years, but I always felt more like a man than a woman. However, I didn’t give my gender or sexuality much thought because I was so focused on my job. Now I know that I had built a wall of distractions to avoid facing the truth about my gender identity.

I studied criminal justice and psychology in college so I could follow in the footsteps of my law enforcement family. I was offered a job as a state police investigator in the early ‘90s and I took it. New York City, here I come! In the 1990s I was assigned to a federal task force at the World Trade Center. On the morning of September 11, 2001, I stopped near the Brooklyn Bridge to pick up bagels to bring to work and received a call telling me that a plane had hit the World Trade Center and that there were two others missing in flight.

I immediately ran to my uncle’s office at the Kings County District Attorney’s Office to get him out of Brooklyn. His office overlooked the Manhattan skyline, and we saw the second plane hit the second tower. Everything seemed surreal, as though time was happening in slow motion. After that, I was directed to help get a fire truck in Brooklyn to go directly to the World Trade Center. I stayed in Brooklyn, attempting to guide fleeing people and their vehicles to safety. The fire truck went over the bridge and never returned. All the firefighters on that truck died that day. I drove over the bridge, witnessing horrific sights as the twin towers collapsed. It is a day and time that still haunts me even twenty years later.

I was disconnected from myself after September 11th, and certainly felt that no one who hadn’t been there could relate to me. Grief and despair were always present, not only for the lives lost, but also because I felt that no one would know the truth of what really happened. It is interesting to me how suppression of the truth has shaped this country in so many ways, especially for marginalized communities. My Catholic faith, my upbringing, and my job all taught me that silence is the best practice. It has been a challenging journey to unlearn some of that.

It wasn’t until 2009 when I met an awesome Black trans woman at work that I even began to comprehend that I might be trans too. She talked to me about gender dysphoria—the distress felt due to the mismatch between someone’s personal sense of their gender and the gender assigned to them at birth—and told me her personal story.

That definition does not begin to describe the soul-searching, gut-wrenching, turbulent, compartmentalizing process that many gender nonconforming people go through, including myself. For me and many others, it was a time of not knowing, then wondering, and finally accepting the reality that you were not born into the right body for who you know yourself to be. You think and fear you are going to be rejected, lose your job, your partner, your family, your God, your friends, and your life as you know it. You go to a place of heaviness and grief until you have the courage to confront it and risk losing it all.

I wasn’t ready yet to take that leap, so I chose again to live in silence. I’d been wearing men’s clothes for twelve years and engaged in relationships with women playing a traditional male role, but I diminished the importance of gender identity. I asked myself repeatedly, “What’s in an identity?” Obviously there is a lot, because suppressing my authentic self was soul-crushing!

In late 2011, I finally started taking steps toward claiming my real identity as a trans man. I legally changed my name to Joey and started asking people to call me Joey. (It was only after my gender-affirming surgery that I legally changed my full name to Jozeppi Angelo). I also started reading up on testosterone. I discussed my feelings about transitioning to male with my doctor, but not with anyone else. At that point my health was deteriorating, most likely because of exposure to chemicals on 9/11. I had difficulty breathing, liver disorders, and bad migraines. I was afraid I might die, as had some of my 9/11 colleagues, before I had the chance to be me.

I was so nervous, but also excited, when I finally had the courage to take testosterone. Unfortunately, I had to stop taking it rather quickly due to my 9/11 health issues. I was devastated and decided to just go through the motions of living. My health continued to take all my energy. I had a few mini strokes and was diagnosed with polycythemia. Feeling unwell was the norm for me, and doctor appointments filled my calendar.

During this same period, I was beginning to question the relationship between the police and marginalized communities. I felt particularly uncomfortable in my professional role. I was dating mostly women of color. The Trayvon Martin case turned
our squad room into an “us versus them” atmosphere. I stood without hesitation with my Black and brown colleagues. There was no doubt that white supremacy existed in my workplace and that some of my fellow police officers expressed these racist beliefs openly at work. This shook me to the core. The continued deaths of my Black and brown siblings at the hands of my law enforcement siblings and my growing awareness of the murders of trans women, particularly Black trans women, left me feeling confused, emotionally detached, and overwhelmed.

During this time, I was encouraged by a friend to attend a Revolutionary Love conference at the Middle Collegiate Church in the East Village of Manhattan. I was told that this conference connected the concepts of love and justice in many different areas of life and that it would give me a deeper understanding of intersectionality among marginalized communities. Attending this conference changed my life! I listened intently to the many speakers who expressed their passion for equality and justice, and I was very intrigued by Middle Collegiate Church’s multicultural diversity. I loved the energy I felt in this church, and the ministers were fully committed to justice work. I became an actively involved member of the church.

I now call the senior minister, Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis, my big sister. She is a strong Black woman who has a heart as big as this world, and she has compassion and wisdom to match. Rev. Jacqui encourages me to use my voice to speak out about gender issues and creates a safe space for me to share my story. It is she and other strong, unconditionally loving, and God-centered women who have helped me be the man and activist I am today.

One Sunday night I sat in a pew under one of the beautiful stained-glass windows, a place I often gravitated to. I looked up and written on the window was the date June 6, which happened to be my Nana’s birthday. She had been my best friend and died at the age of ninety-two shortly after 9/11, which had added to my feelings of emptiness and sorrow. Sitting in the pew that night, I knew that this church had called to me and that I finally had found a place of peace inside myself. When Middle burned down in 2020, I sobbed. In that building, I had learned about and felt unconditional love and truly understood that this trans man has a seat at God’s table.

I retired from law enforcement due to my deteriorating health and three years later, I made the decision to move to Sedona, Arizona, because Western medicine wasn’t working for me. I knew that my Middle Collegiate Church family would always be with me even after I moved.

When I arrived in Sedona, my lymphatic system was shutting down and I had tumors in all parts of my body. I began working with my naturopath practitioner and went through a two-year, grueling, roller-coaster healing journey incorporating a plant-based Indigenous diet and detox methods with ayurvedic practices. Early on in this journey I recognized that my own healing required me to connect to my gender identity. My mantra became, “Honor the body I’m in, and love and be the man I’ve always been inside.”

I spent my first year in Sedona focused entirely on my physical health, trying to stay alive and heal from my 9/11-related diseases. I didn’t connect with many people during this period and when I began to, it was challenging. I was often misgendered, sometimes purposefully. I would repeatedly request that others use he/him pronouns to describe me, and I spent a lot of time and energy educating people about using correct pronouns even in my LGBTQIA2S+ community. I didn’t realize how hard it would be for me or other trans people to be accepted and affirmed there.

It was my connections with my Indigenous identity and communities that sustained me during this time. For years, aware from adoption records that I was partly Indigenous, I had sporadically learned about history and connected with other Indigenous people. Living in Sedona, near them, I could immerse myself in that part of my identity. I learned, listened, and leaned into my Indigenous spirit, honored to be guided by several Indigenous elders. They all supported me through the growth of my Spirit Walk, toward acceptance and adoption into the Hopi family. Grandmother Roanna Jackson adopted me into her family, the Hopi Sand Clan, in 2021.

My Hopi siblings gave me the name Flower Rock, which is a three-tier boulder that guards the First Mesa of Hopi Land. Mysteriously, flowers bloom from this rock every spring. Valencia, my Hopi sister, says, “Only a bulldozer can move Flower Rock, just like Joey.” Grandmother Roanna gave me the name Snake Warrior. Snake medicine is powerful, primal, healing, and transformational. My Hopi family sees, welcomes, and accepts who I am. We have never talked about my transition. We continue to share deep heart experiences and conversations.

As my health continued to improve, after a year in Sedona, I became involved with our local LGBTQIA2S+ organization. We held a transgender summit for the whole state of Arizona. I was the emcee at this sold-out event! During this summit I became vividly aware of the intersectionality of race, sexual orientation, and gender identity. I was also reminded of the lack of understanding and support for the BIPOC LGBTQIA2S+ community, who experience most of the violence, housing and job discrimination, and homelessness.

Misgendering, microaggressions, and macroaggressions toward me and other gender nonconforming folks continued. For example, one gay white man often remarked that my voice wasn’t deep enough. He would sit in his office at work and talk openly to others about me. Another gay white man repeatedly called me “she” whenever he was talking about me to other people. I continued to request that these men use my correct pronouns and respect my trans male identity, but they never did. The only person in Sedona I shared these experiences with was my therapist. The emotional damage was taking a toll on my body and my heart.

I never imagined experiencing harassment from white gay men in their sixties. However, I’ve since learned from personal experience and from other trans people that the cisgender lesbian, gay, and bisexual community does not always understand or affirm the trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming community, a division that needs to end. In the past few months, I’ve realized that Sedona is not a welcoming community. It has been the continued presence of my friends, Indigenous family, and faith community that has kept my spirits up.

We are currently experiencing anti-transgender legislation all around the country. The propaganda pushed by legislators, religious leaders, and parents is not based on facts and is blatant
discrimination. My personal hope lies in our youth. I've witnessed some amazingly courageous trans and nonbinary youth activists and I've asked them to join me in using our voices together to undo damaging anti-trans legislation. Young folks are speaking up and taking their protests to the streets, to courthouses, and to social media, where they are creating queer-positive peer groups and online communities. They are determined to disrupt the stifling environment that so many transgender and nonbinary youth are living in today.

When I started my healing journey, I blamed my bad health completely on the 9/11 toxins. That was only partly true. My healing process taught me that 9/11 was just a part of the iceberg within me. I had buried truths about the emotional, mental, and physical abuse I had experienced as a child from a sibling and the impact my parents’ inaction had on me. Choosing to be silent, building walls, and suppressing all these truths for decades almost cost me my life. If I could say anything to my younger self, it would be, “Breathe. You will be safe and in control of your life when you get older.”

I haven’t said much about my immediate family or relationships because I’ve always kept my private life private due to my job and because of the lack of acceptance from my family. My relationship with my mother was always challenging and complicated. In recent years, despite my frequent requests, she refused to call me Joey. However, just before she passed, she gave me a great gift. I flew east to see her right before her death. When I sat down at her bedside, she was sleeping. I touched her and said “Annunziata, che fai?” Italian for “Nancy, what are you doing?” I had always greeted my mother this way on the phone because then she knew it was me.

Surprisingly, she opened her eyes and said, “Hey, Joey.” And then she closed her eyes. Those were the last words she spoke to me. I sat quietly by her side filled with emotion, holding her hand. Her caregiver was shocked. “Oh, my gosh. Your mother told me that she would never call you Joey.” I felt deeply touched that my mom had finally recognized me as the man I am today. Her son, Joey.

My family today is my chosen family. I have Pastor Jacqui Lewis from Middle Collegiate Church and Chris Nelson Mohn, a special friend whom I met before I transitioned. I have also coparented a few multicultural children in different stages of their lives. I recently had the honor to officiate at my chosen daughter’s wedding. I also have my Hopi Indian family in Arizona whom I honor by supporting them financially and helping their children strive for a better future and education.

I met Chris Mohn in 2013 on the Living Legacy Pilgrimage, a trip to famous civil rights sites. She and I sat at the same table the first night. Every day for the next week, we processed what we were witnessing and how it was impacting us. We also began to share our personal lives and continued to communicate after the trip. Chris and her partner visited me in Brooklyn, listened to my law enforcement stories, went with me to Washington, DC, for the National Peace Officer Memorial week, and visited me in Sedona twice to witness my life with my Indigenous community and to support my transition. I visited Chris in Massachusetts right after my mother’s death in New Jersey. Chris is and will always be a part of my chosen family.

For me, at long last I’ve become the man I always knew I was. I feel like a man. I am a man. All is finally well and whole with my soul. I live by the philosophy that everyone, including myself, wants to be seen, heard, loved, and affirmed. If I can do anything to facilitate that kind of life for any trans or nonbinary person of any age, I will. I hope those of you reading my words will join me in the challenge and joy of creating compassionate, safe places that honor diversity and equality, places where no human must live in the margins of society.

**Chris Mohn**
**Retired teacher, parent, Unitarian Universalist**

I met Joey before his transition when we both went on the Living Legacy Pilgrimage. This tour was founded by the Unitarian Universalist minister Gordon Gibson, to meet the people, hear the stories, and visit the sites that changed the world in the Civil Rights movement. Not only were Joey and I re-energized in our commitment to racial justice, but we also became friends.

Since then, I have witnessed his journey to accept and become his true self, a queer man, and a passionate advocate for the trans community, locally and nationally. However, that is only part of his story. His professional life as a law enforcement officer and his Two-Spirit Hopi family life, for example, are also significant, sometimes conflicting and challenging, parts of his identity. He is committed to bringing people with different understandings about these identities together to hear, see, accept one another, to bridge divides, and to work together for justice for all.

As a Unitarian Universalist, one of my Sources of wisdom and the one that is most important to me is “Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” Joey and many of my adolescent students in the LGBTQ+ community are such “prophetic people” for me because of the way they live their lives. Their stories of survival, authenticity, courage, creativity, and persistence inspire me to be present for truth telling, companion the “othered,” and dig deep for my own authenticity, courage, creativity, and persistence for myself and in the service of others.

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**Authentic Selves**
Celebrating Trans and Nonbinary People and Their Families

Interviews by Peggy Gillespie
Photographs by Robin Rayne, Jill Meyers, and others

Alex Kapitan, consultant
In collaboration with PFLAG National, The Transgender Legal Defense & Education Fund, and Family Diversity Projects

Based on an exhibit originally created by Jack Pierson with Peggy Gillespie and Gigi Kaeser for Family Diversity Projects.
"Love—the beauty of it, the joy of it and even the pain of it—is the most incredible gift to give and receive as a human being."

—Elliot Page

This book celebrates trans and nonbinary people and their families. The journey of self-discovery for the participants and for you, the readers, continues. Whether you are trans and/or nonbinary, questioning your identity, have trans and nonbinary loved ones, or perhaps all of the above, please remember always that you are not alone. In every moment of your lives there are opportunities to strengthen your pride and acceptance of all people, including yourselves.

Dear readers, I am wishing strength and loving kindness to all of you. Please take good care of each other and your beautiful authentic selves. Here below are some resources for support, deeper learning, and advocacy.

—Peggy Gillespie

**Resources for Exploring Identity**


**Resources for Family Members and Allies**

- *The Reflective Workbook for Partners of Transgender People: Your Transition as Your Partner Transitions* by D. M. Maynard (2019)

**Organizations to Follow, Support, and Learn From**

There are many worthy organizations, from large national networks to small regional ones, that are doing vital work to support transgender and nonbinary people and their families. The following selection represents just a few good sources for up-to-date information, resources, and advocacy opportunities. Be sure to look into advocacy groups, support networks, and trans-led organizations in your local area to access resources tailored to your region.

- **Equality Federation** ([equalityfederation.org](http://equalityfederation.org)): an organization that does grassroots state-based organizing across the United States to advance pro-LGBTQ policies and defeat anti-LGBTQ legislation, including anti-trans bills
- **Family Equality** ([familyequality.org](http://familyequality.org)): an organization that works to resource and advocate for families with LGBTQ parents and/or children through community building, media projects, and legal advocacy
- **GenderCool** ([gendercool.org](http://gendercool.org)): an organization that shares positive stories of trans and nonbinary young people and works to dispel myths about trans and nonbinary youth through speaking engagements and inclusivity consultation
- **Gender Spectrum** ([genderspectrum.org](http://genderspectrum.org)): one of the leading US organizations offering training and support for educators and other professionals, with the goal of creating gender-sensitive and inclusive environments for all children and teens
- **Genders & Sexualities Alliance Network** ([gsanetwork.org](http://gsanetwork.org)): a national US network of GSAs that supports youth-led LGBTQ groups and trains queer, trans, and allied youth leaders to advocate for safer schools and communities
- **Global Action for Trans Equality** ([gate.ngo](http://gate.ngo)): an international advocacy organization working toward justice and equality for trans, gender diverse, and intersex communities
- **GLSEN** ([glsen.org](http://glsen.org)): the longest-running US network of students, families, and educators working to create affirming school environments for LGBTQ students through resources, research, and policy work
- **PFLAG** ([pflag.org](http://pflag.org)): the first and largest US organization dedicated to supporting, educating, and advocating for LGBTQ+ families, particularly parents and other family members of LGBTQ+ people, with hundreds of local chapters across the country
- **Transgender Law Center** ([transgenderlawcenter.org](http://transgenderlawcenter.org)): the largest trans-led organization in the United States, working toward trans liberation through advocacy, litigation, organizing, and movement building, rooted in racial justice
- **Transgender Legal Defense & Education Fund** ([transgenderlegal.org](http://transgenderlegal.org)): an organization working to end discrimination and achieve equality for trans people in the US through public education, test-case litigation, direct legal services, and public policy efforts
- **Trans Lifeline** ([translifeline.org](http://translifeline.org)): a trans-led organization that connects trans people to the community, support, and resources they need to survive and thrive, including microgrants and a peer support hotline
- **Trans Youth Equality Foundation** ([transyouthequality.org](http://transyouthequality.org)): an organization that supports trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming young people through support groups, retreats, and other resources
- **The Trevor Project** ([thetrevorproject.org](http://thetrevorproject.org)): the world’s largest suicide prevention and mental health organization for young LGBTQ+ people, offering youth crisis support, legal advocacy, research, and educator training
Teens are under intense pressure to conform to society’s stereotypes of masculinity, even as more and more evidence reveals how conventional cultural messages to “man up” can be detrimental to their mental health. In The Masculinity Workbook for Teens, psychologist Chris Reigeluth provides sorely needed guidance to help teen boys chart an authentic, intentional, healthy course to develop wholesome masculine identities.

Limiting and restrictive gender stereotypes and social practices are pervasive across cultures, and research shows that strict adherence to the rules of the code—or extreme forms of “traditional” masculinity, such as suppressing your feelings, acting tough and “in control,” as well as objectifying girls and women—can lead to emotional issues, aggressive behavior, low self-esteem, risk-taking behaviors, misogyny, and homophobia. Negative health outcomes, like depression and anxiety, are also possible. Reigeluth designed his workbook to help young teen males to navigate these mixed messages.

The Masculinity Workbook for Teens uses a series of prompts and easy-to-follow worksheets to engage readers. It features three individually tailored letters that Reigeluth—noted for his expertise on teen masculinity—wrote to his anticipated readers: teen guys; their parents, caregivers, and mentors; and their psychotherapists, counselors, and other supporters.

The book also features activities designed to help young men understand their own views about manhood and masculinity. One way it does that is by listing attributes relating to physical appearance, interests, and emotional traits that teen males can use as a guide to identify as relating to either girls and women or guys. The workbook unpacks conventional thinking about masculinity and offers activities to help readers understand how the pressures of the “Guy Code” influence them.

Reigeluth reminds his teen readers that there are no hard and fast rules they must conform to, emphasizing that believing or rejecting gender stereotypes is a choice. Each of them, he says, gets to decide how to express his individual version of manhood.

Learning how society views masculinity—positively, negatively, or in flux—may be eye-opening for some readers. The tips and tools in this workbook will be useful in helping teen males to take a deeper look at their inner lives. Facing difficult thoughts and emotions with a guidebook like this on their bookshelf will likely mean more and more young men will successfully explore their inner lives and, as a consequence, will be better equipped to ask for help when they need it.

An Open Letter to Teen Guys From Chris

Hey!

I’m so glad you’ve picked up The Masculinity Workbook for Teens and are giving it a shot. I decided to write this because when I was your age there was a lot of pressure to fit in, prove one’s self, and be “the man.” This pressure could be pretty intense and sometimes made it hard to relax, even around my friends. Lots of guys were trying to outdo one another and insults and teasing often flew around like pinballs. I know from talking with teen guys your age that there is still lots of pressure to fit in and prove yourself as a guy.

So, what is this constant teasing and pressure to prove ourselves as guys all about?

While I couldn’t have answered this question at your age, I now know that the constant pressure many guys experience to prove that they belong and are “man enough” comes from something called the Guy Code (coined by Michael Kimmel, a sociologist). Have you heard of it, or do you have any guesses as to what it might be?

The Guy Code and the Banana

I was not educated on gender when I was your age. My friends and I were taught that there is one way to be as a guy, and if you don’t do what’s expected then that will be a problem. Depending on the school you go to and what your parents or caregivers are like, perhaps you’ve been encouraged to think about what it means to be a guy, or perhaps your experience is similar to mine, and these topics haven’t been introduced.

For example, I can remember taking a sex education class in the eighth grade with Mr. Baldwin, who actually did a pretty decent job. And yes, the class awkwardly included Mr. Baldwin showing us 13- and 14-year-old guys how condoms worked using a banana, which was hilarious and awkward. Even though the class only had students in it who identified as guys, we were never taught about how the Guy Code works or encouraged to think about masculinity pressures for ourselves. Similarly, I don’t remember any of my “wellness classes” in high school exploring gender stuff at all—almost like an unwritten rule exists that one’s gender identity and society’s expectations about masculinity shouldn’t be questioned and explored. So that’s exactly what we’re going to do.
Simply put, the Guy Code is the set of rules that society—and consequently many of the boys, men, and other people you’ll encounter—expects teen guys, like yourself, to follow to meet expectations and be accepted. We’ll get into the actual rules soon enough, and you may even notice some of them jumping into your head as you read these sentences.

At your age, I knew exactly what was expected of me to be the “right” type of guy, and you probably do too. My friends and other guys also frequently reminded me when I was failing to cut it. We all were! With few exceptions, it’s pretty much impossible to be a teen boy and not have your friends or other guys give you a hard time about all sorts of stuff. The insults and pressure can be about anything, from something stupid you did to messing up at sports to wearing the wrong shirt.

What I didn’t understand at the time is that I didn’t have to buy into all of these masculinity expectations and the constant pressure to perform and prove myself. I didn’t have to buy into society’s narrow recipe for how guys should be, nor take it so seriously when other guys and people told me how I needed to be as “a guy.” I could decide for myself, and had options.

Now, I know what you’re probably thinking: easier said than done, Chris. Of course, you’re right about that. The teenage years are no joke with social pressure and changes, like puberty, that can make everyone feel insecure and unsure about themselves. Furthermore, guys can be pretty hard on one another, and who wants to draw additional negative attention by going against the group and doing their own thing? Not many guys, that’s for sure, including me when I was your age! So, we’ll spend some time exploring the challenges of taking a stand, possible repercussions, and different ways to stand up for yourself and others (for if and when that’s what feels right for you).

The other thing I didn’t understand as a teen, and that we’ll get into more, is that this Guy Code stuff isn’t always so helpful, and it can have pretty negative consequences for guys. Now, that’s not to say that it isn’t working out just fine for you. You’ll be able to assess the pros and cons of the Guy Code for yourself throughout this journey. Each of us is unique, and the ways that masculinity pressures impact each one of us will vary.

So, what am I getting at here? Well, I hope that all teen guys, like you, can be fully informed about what the Guy Code is, how it works, where it comes from, and, most importantly, how it influences them. With that understanding, you’ll be able to more easily decide for yourself, and on your own terms, what type of guy and person you want to be.

Once you’ve made your way through The Masculinity Workbook for Teens, you might decide, I’m good to go and not looking to make any changes. Or, you might conclude that making a few small adjustments, or even big ones, is what feels right. There is no “correct” outcome or end result for this journey. My only agenda is to provide you (and other teen guys) with a greater understanding of how the Guy Code works and what it’s all about, so you can be critical consumers and decide on your own terms who you are and how you want to be.

Let’s get started!

Chris

Christopher S. Reigeluth is a child and adolescent psychologist and an assistant professor in the clinical psychology division at Oregon Health and Science University. Reach him at reigelut@ohsu.edu.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Upholder:</th>
<th>Resister:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dress + Style:</td>
<td>Brad is pretty standard in his dress and generally wears blue jeans and T-shirts or flannels and really likes sports hats.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mel goes through periods of dyeing his hair different colors and sometimes wears nail polish.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interests:</td>
<td>Like his older brothers, Jesse plays lots of sports and doesn’t put much effort into schoolwork.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Justin plays sports, but he also sings in the choir, is really into language arts, and is one of the top students in his grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Expression:</td>
<td>Kenji doesn’t show many feelings, besides anger, and even when feeling upset and down about things he keeps them to himself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arun is very emotionally expressive. Even though other guys tease him about it, he has cried at school and is more open with people about his emotions, like when he feels down.</td>
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On April 20, 1999, two students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, committed what was then the deadliest school shooting in U.S. history. In the ensuing decades, we’ve become all too familiar with gun violence in schools. In the nearly quarter century since Columbine, there have been plenty of other mass shootings; only the deadliest make the headlines. Virginia Tech (2007), Sandy Hook (2012), Parkland (2018), Uvalde (2022). In March, Nashville; in April, Allen, Texas.

Last year, there were 51 school shootings in the United States. So far in 2023, the K-12 database has recorded 89 gun-related incidents at a school. Since Columbine, 175 people have been killed in school shootings.

Today, the leading cause of death among children in the US is guns. There are many dimensions to the crisis, but to truly reckon with this issue, we need to address the fact that the overwhelming majority of shooters are male.

Here’s what we know: bullying lays the foundation for school shootings.

In the aftermath of Columbine, the US Secret Service started researching common threads among school shooters. While the report they released in 2004 couldn’t identify a clear profile of a student attacker, they did find that nearly 70 percent of the attackers had experienced bullying and harassment at the hands of their peers.

In a similar study in 2019, that number had risen to 80 percent and bullying was identified as a primary motive.

In a similar study in 2019, that number had risen to 80 percent and bullying was identified as a primary motive. On one hand, bullying offers a clear explanation for school violence; one that has resonated with the media and general public for more than two decades. On the other hand, it’s misleading and distracting. Because nearly all bullied youth—and in particular queer, non-white and disabled youth who are the most vulnerable at school—ever engage in mass shootings.

If the most vulnerable to bullying are not doing the shooting, who is?

According to the research published over the last two decades, more than 97 percent of student attackers are male. That matters. Gun violence is intertwined with society’s messages about masculinity.

Mass Shootings Between 1989 and 2023: US = 138, Canada = 8

In 2020, Canada experienced its deadliest shooting in modern history, in Nova Scotia, where a man killed 22 people. In the days following the shooting, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau asked the media to avoid mentioning the name of the perpetrator, to not “give him the gift of infamy.”

It was a measured response probably intended to diminish the likelihood of copycat attacks. In comparison, the sensationalized news coverage that followed the Columbine massacre helped foster what became known as the “Columbine effect”—a chain of more than 50 related attacks in the two decades that followed.

Both responses, however, demonstrate the limited options available within public discourse to respond to this kind of senseless violence. Trudeau turned to gun control, while Columbine was followed with a push for zero-tolerance, anti-bullying policies. It goes without saying that...
Nearly all bullied youth—and in particular queer, nonwhite and disabled youth who are the most vulnerable at school—ever engage in mass shootings.

gun control matters, and that bullying prevention is worthwhile. But neither effectively examines the significant links between masculinity and mass shootings.

Look no further than the perpetrator of the 1989 École Polytechnique massacre in Montréal. Before he began firing, the shooter, who specifically targeted women, declared that he was “fighting feminism.” Fourteen women were murdered; another ten women and four men were injured.

Rather than naming the intersection between masculinity and gun violence, newspaper headlines often portray shooters as ‘monsters.’ However, “by referring to them as monsters,” researcher Mia Consalvo points out, “a slippage occurs—‘monsters’ are not seen as gendered creatures.”

A faculty member in communication studies at Concordia University in Montréal, Prof. Consalvo says, “Until masculinity and its different constructions are better explored in general society—as well as in the news—we, as news audiences and citizens, will be blind to how these masculinities are linked—falsely and not—to damaging traits and behaviors.” For Consalvo, “ignoring these differentials, masculinity as a system will remain untouched, and opportunities for examining how boys and men might feel trapped in a losing system go unexplored. The events at Columbine High School and others like them demand better understandings of how masculinities are constructed, contested, and reaffirmed in American society.”

Her observation is affirmed by sociologists Michael Kimmel and Matthew Mahler who researched school shootings in the United States. They found that “nearly all” male shooters reported having been specifically harassed for inadequate gender performance. The profile that emerges, they conclude, is of white boys who have been targeted mercilessly every single day of their lives for not measuring up to cultural norms of masculinity.

“I am not insane,” a 16-year-old boy wrote in a note before he opened fire at his high school in 1997. “I am angry. This was not a cry for attention, it was not a cry for help. It was a scream in sheer agony.”

Stories like his are stories of “cultural marginalization” based on what it means to be a man, Kimmel explains. They weren’t good enough. “So, they did what any self-respecting man would do in a situation like that—or so they thought,” concludes Kimmel. “They retaliated.”

Through a gendered-looking glass darkly

From an early age, boys learn that violence is not only acceptable, but admirable. Teenage boys are four times as likely as girls to think fighting is a form of conflict resolution. Almost half of all high school boys in Canada have experienced some form of physical assault. One in five have been threatened with a weapon. Research has shown that boys are more likely than girls to be exposed to violence—and more likely to translate that exposure into the perpetration of violence themselves.

That’s why it matters to look at gun violence through a gendered lens.

To be clear, what has made school-based violence more deadly in the United States in recent history is access to firearms. But a culture of violence is at the heart of male shooters. All too often,
the easiest strategy for regaining your status as a man is to commit violence against others.

“It was not because they were deviants,” Kimmel adds, “but rather because they were ‘over conformists’ to a particular normative construction of masculinity, a construction that defines violence as a legitimate response to perceived humiliation.”

School culture is part of the pattern of rampage shootings

All of this points to the fact that mass shootings in schools are not just about bullying, but also boys’ experiences of gender-based harassment, compounded by their immersion in a culture that normalizes and valorizes retaliation.

Boys are versed in the vocabulary of violence, but whether they choose to speak that language depends on their surroundings. Schools are a major author of that narrative.

After the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007, it was observed that the schoolyard shooters don’t need to be profiled—they can’t be. Rather, it’s the schools. Places like Columbine and Virginia Tech, where athletes and sports programs were privileged, and the teachers and administration invariably turned a blind eye to bullying and violence. They are places where school mental health services are missing because of a lack of funding, and where student hierarchies are maintained through relentless harassment.

I’ve seen this lead to other forms of physical violence in my hometown of Toronto: Devan Bracci-Selvey. Jack Meldrum. Jesse Clarke, young Canadians killed in the last decade. Unchecked sexual violence across North America: Glen Ridge. Steubenville. Vanderbilt—cases where student athletes gang-raped women. “It wasn’t just that (the Columbine murderers) Harris and Klebold—and other eventual rampage shooters—were bullied and harassed and intimidated every day,” Kimmel points out. “It was that the administration, teachers, and community colluded with it.”

If we really want to face the roots of gun violence in our schools, we need to look in the mirror. We need to collectively examine how we teach boys about masculinity, how we respond to the brutality of their peers, and how we influence the spaces they inhabit. And we need to do something about it.

The conversation might look like this.

When the problem of male violence came up in a school program run by Next Gen Men, where I work, an eighth grader raised his hand. “It’s not like we need to be fixed,” he interjected. “Nobody here would do anything like that.”

“I believe you,” I responded, “but I also believe that most of the boys who were in that situation would have said the same thing.” I thought for a moment. “Things that need to be fixed are things that are broken,” I said, then paused to look around the room.

Then I said, “You’re not. You’re the best chance of stopping violence before it even happens.”

There’s a nuance there that isn’t possible in newspaper headlines, or in an unsafe learning environment. I knew that student well enough to know what he was getting at. He knew me well enough to know I meant what I said. Because of that, I was able to have a conversation about masculinity and violence while remaining connected to the young people in the midst of it.

This is what it looks like to put anti-violence into practice, to help young people—boys and young men in particular—make sense of the root causes of violence, and their role in challenging it. What came to the fore in Columbine in 1999 has become a pattern of violence that stems from the disconnection, aggrieved entitlement and rage rebellion of vulnerable boys and young men.

To change that, with our eyes wide open, we need to look at the ways young people navigate the violent tenets of masculinity, and we need to empower boys themselves to become leaders of the change we so desperately need.

Jonathon Reed is Youth Program Manager at Next Gen Men (nextgenmen.ca). More information about him is at the end of his article on page 9.
Men for Democracy is an online advocacy organization and guerilla think tank created to help men—as men—to fight for an expansive, inclusive, and participatory American democracy at a time when growing authoritarianism and political violence imperils that vital project.

As the critical 2024 campaign season approaches, Men for Democracy plans to mobilize men—of varying political views and identities—around a series of key issues:

- Defending democracy
- Reproductive justice
- Denouncing misogyny and violence in politics
- Supporting anti-sexist men in public life
- Pushing media to cover masculinities and politics

We hope you’ll join us!

For more information go to menfordemocracy.com
You can hear *Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini* blasting from the jukebox in the snack shack at A Lion’s Beach.

Three songs for a quarter. Sometimes they play *Itsy Bitsy* three times in a row. A stupid song that sticks in your head because they play it a lot.

Some girls at A Lion’s Beach wear bikinis. You don’t, of course.

*Tan Shoes and Pink Shoelaces* plays. Another song you sing along with, but think is stupid. *Come Softly to Me* is one of your favorites. But they never play *Come Softly* on the jukebox. Now it’s *16 Candles*.

One of your favorite things is to dance. But *never ever* in the snack shack at A Lion’s Beach where the teenagers dance. You dance with a cement post in the cellar when Dick Clark and American Bandstand come on the radio. After you finish packing the eggs at the grader and no one is left down in the cellar anymore, you jitterbug with the post, so good for pushing against. You even do slow dances with it.

Marty saw you once from the cellar steps and started yelling.

*Annie’s kissing the post. Annie’s kissing the post.*

Another time you wanted to kill him. Well not really kill him. Just make him shut up and mind his own business.

Now your father comes to where you’re sitting on the sand, wrapped cozy in a towel, drying off from swimming. Not like the teenagers who never go in the water because they’re afraid their bikinis might slide off.

Your father says he needs a pack of cigarettes, *right now.*

He wants you to go get them. You don’t want to. Don’t say yes. Don’t say no. He’s just doing this because he doesn’t want you to be shy, which you are, and even more shy about going where the teenagers are.

To get to the wooden door with its top half open where people buy things, a person has to go into the small wood building with the jukebox and the teenagers in it. Your eyes water and get blurry just walking up the sand hill toward it. They sell Fudgesicles and Creamsicles at that half open door, but you would sooner not have any than have to go in there to buy one. Your father knows this even though you never told him. He holds out a quarter for a pack of Kents. An extra quarter to play three songs in the jukebox.

He says you have no choice. You have to go because he’s telling you to. He pulls you up. When you’re standing, he opens your hand. Puts the quarters into it. *Now go.*

You don’t.
I said go. What? Are you afraid they'll eat you?
When you don't move, he hollers I don't understand you. Nobody is going to bite your head off.
He pushes your back. Go!
You take small steps. Drag your feet in the sand.
You aren't afraid anybody is going to bite your head off. You just aren't like him. You never will be a person who's not afraid of anything.
You aren't like him and never will be. No matter how hard he pushes your back. Or pushes you with his words. He can't force you to be different than you are.
The music gets louder the closer you get. Your eyes get blurrier.
You'll never be one of those confident teenagers who talks loud and mixes with a big crowd. You just aren't a crowd person.
And you don't want to be. Well maybe sometimes, just a tiny bit.
Once in a while you do wish you were confident like he is.
Like the girls in the snack shack who talk loud and laugh and wear bikinis and are not one single bit shy or embarrassed, whose eyes never get blurry when they have to look at lots of kids at once.
They never think for a minute of running away and hiding. Never wish to be a turtle and not come out when they don't want to.
Getting closer you look down. That's how you will go in and buy his cigarettes—looking down. You'll only look up for a second when you have to give the money and take the pack from the person behind the half open door. You hear that stupid song again about an itsy bitsy teenie weenie yellow polka dot bikini.
You wish you would never hear that song again. But even more you wish you had the power to make yourself invisible. To disappear into thin air.
You think of the name of a song you heard once. Smoke Gets in Your Eyes.
You don't know the words but think that song is about what you feel now.
If you could be surrounded by smoke, that would be the next best thing to being invisible.
You have an idea when you are about to go up the three wood steps.
You'll pretend to be invisible. Pretend that no one can see you.
Only you will know you are there. For just one magic minute, the person selling Kent cigarettes will hear your voice, see the quarter in your hand, trade the pack for the quarter and then won't see you.
Of course, you won't put the other quarter in the jukebox. Though it would be funny if Come Softly to Me all of a sudden started to play and nobody knew how it happened.

Ani Tuzman is an award-winning poet, author, and writing mentor who for over 40 years has helped people of all ages find and free their voices. She is the author of a historical novel, The Tremble of Love: A Novel of the Baal Shem Tov. JUKEBOX” is a vignette from her new memoir, Angels on the Clothesline. To learn more about her work visit www.anituzman.com.
The study of masculinities, and how patriarchy plays out in practice, is a matter of urgency for anyone engaged in the struggle for gender equality. It was thrown into stark relief by the fact that as we were finalizing our book, *Patriarchy in Practice*, in 2022, Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine in the largest military conflict in continental Europe since the Second World War. Putin is one in a line of new strongmen that Ruth Ben-Ghiat describes in her book *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present*, whose autocratic style has a distinctly hypermasculine foundation. The unaccountability allows—and amplifies—its effects and projects it onto the world stage with catastrophic consequences.

A close examination of masculinities, patriarchy and their role in current events is critical to understanding the volatile shifts taking place in the world today. Indeed, it was the twin events in 2016 of the election of Donald Trump as US president and Brexit that drove us to organize a conference at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London in 2019 to explore the nature of masculinities in this context from an ethnographic perspective. The events in the world are not just confined to the corridors of state power, but cascade into wider social contexts. From continued and increasing violence by men against women around the world, to men’s attempts to control women’s bodies, to the current surge in far-right politics and its evident associations with hypermasculinity and misogyny, we are reminded time and time again that patriarchy is far from dead.

Our book grew out of papers that were presented at the event, which was originally titled “(Towards) Post Patriarchal Masculinities.” Our intent was to interrogate the relationship between personhood, patriarchies, and masculinities from an anthropological and ethnographic perspective. Yet as we prepared the manuscript, it became clear that we risked implying that we were already done with patriarchy. While envisioning post patriarchical forms of masculinity is an ultimate aspiration, it can be achieved through patient examination of different, situated examples. To the extent that masculinities might be considered patriarchies in practice, close attention to the various local, social contexts is an avenue to understanding and opening possible avenues for liberation, transformation, and healing. Yet it is dangerous—perhaps now more than even in 2016—to only dream of a Utopian future when faced with a dire present. The current wave of autocratic populism and backlash against feminism and women’s rights is not the first and will not be the last. As US feminist Susan Faludi pointed out 30 years ago:

*The last decade has seen a powerful counterassault on women’s rights, a backlash, an attempt to undo many of the hard-won victories the feminist movement did manage to win for women. ... And in every case, the timing coincided with signs that*
women were believed to be on the verge of breakthrough. In other words, the antifeminist backlash has been set off not by women’s achievement of full equality but by the increased possibility that they might win it.

Today’s backlash, as with others in the past, points towards the success of feminist and women’s rights organizations as much as it now risks such work being undone. These are familiar tropes of masculinity’s “crisis tendencies,” as Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell says, coupled with a renaissance of far-right, misogynist politics. Cas Mudde, a Dutch political scientist who focuses on political extremism and populism in Europe and the United States, notes: “It is clear that gender, and specifically masculinity…plays a role in terms of the propaganda and appeal of radical right parties and politicians.” Right-wing movements—old and new, online and offline—have spilled over from the margins to the mainstream.

While the current situation in many countries cannot be reduced to a conflict based only on gender, it remains a powerful axis of mobilization with enormous potential consequences, from the significant increase in online abuse towards women to far-right terror attacks founded on the notion that masculinity in the West is in decline.

These backlashes can be seen at least in part as a reaction to the continuing resistance of feminist organizations, individuals, and their allies against patriarchal practices. The struggle for reproductive justice—especially access to safe and legal abortion—is a particularly notable case in point. While many countries have liberalized abortion laws, huge numbers of women around the world (and disproportionately in the Global South) still lack access to safe reproductive healthcare.

Women’s bodies have always been a key locus of male control, and this is also true today.

In June 2022, despite its being law for nearly 50 years, the US Supreme Court, its balance of power having shifted in favor of conservative, antiabortion justices, overturned Roe v. Wade. In Poland, after a series of legal challenges since 2011, the government passed a controversial law amounting to a near-total ban on abortion in October 2020, which was met by widespread protests. The consequences became real all too quickly: in 2021 a mother died of septic shock in Pszczyna hospital after doctors refused to remove a non-viable fetus for fear of the new legislation.

Yet victories still occur; in Colombia, abortion was decriminalized in February 2022, marking an historic achievement for women’s rights. While it may generally have been possible to speak of a slow and steady improvement in access to abortion since the 1960s, we should be wary of assuming that such trends will necessarily continue without a hard fight. No situation is immutable, in any direction; freedoms that are hard-won can be lost, just as seemingly insurmountable barriers can be overcome.

While the gains made over the past decades in women’s rights are a cause for celebration, each advancement has galvanized various forms of right-wing resistance. Movements organized around the achievement of justice in gender, race and sexuality represent an almost existential threat—not just to individual men, but to the wider patriarchal systems and structures that they valorize and seek to defend. Indeed, as we and other contributors explore in our book, there is a sense of disenfranchisement and alienation among many men, some even going so far as to believe that patriarchy has been supplanted and replaced by a “matriarchy” that is actively hostile to their interests as men.

A perception among many of these groups is that there is a “war on masculinity,” a particular flashpoint being the American Psychological Association’s identification of “toxic masculinity” as a threat to men’s mental health. US podcaster Joe Rogan has made the claim that “woke culture” is designed to “silence straight men.” Other countercultural public intellectuals continue sustained attacks on so-called “cultural Marxism” and “critical race theory,” which they claim are infiltrating public life. Yet the surge in antifeminist rhetoric and strongman politics also presents a unique opportunity to interrogate masculinity’s relationship with patriarchy as well as how it may be extricated from it.

It is this moment of crisis for masculinity, particularly its relationship with patriarchy, that sets the frame for Patriarchy in Practice. To what extent is patriarchy expressed in and linked to masculinities, or the various shapes that they take? In what ways and contexts can specific enactments of masculinity make visible, undermine, challenge, or reconfigure patriarchal power structures? And perhaps most importantly, what might masculinity look like if it were not linked to patriarchy, but rather grounded in feminist principles of gender justice?

We believe that one reason—though by no means the only one—for the continued backlash is an absence of meaningful alternatives to patriarchal masculinities. In many ways, this is the core preoccupation of our efforts; insofar as masculinity is inextricably bound to patriarchy, the diminution of its power and privilege is indeed an existential threat to men, for there is no other way to live or find meaning. Gender is not by any means the whole of an identity, but it is certainly a potent part. We are inspired by bell hooks, who wrote two decades ago that “If men are to reclaim the essential goodness of male being, if they are to regain the space of openheartedness and emotional expressiveness that is the foundation of well-being, we must envision alternatives to patriarchal masculinity. We must all change.”

At its simplest, the current crisis of masculinity opens a vista onto the relationship between masculinities, patriarchies and the various individuals or groups that enact, sustain, challenge or subvert them. Our book features a collection of ethnographic chapters from a range of countries and contexts, intended to explore the spaces where masculinity and patriarchy are at work. We are interested in the question of the extent to which masculinities may be thought of as patriarchy in practice. In doing so, we hope to open space for exploring the alternatives that hooks speaks of. It is a long and winding road, considering patriarchy’s resilience—yet we hope that the chapters assembled here might give some thought (and some hope) as to how it might be accomplished.

What might masculinity look like if it were not linked to patriarchy, but rather grounded in feminist principles of gender justice?

Dan Nightingale’s doctoral thesis focused on the politics of vaccination in Ireland. He has long been interested in feminism, masculinities, and gender justice. Nikki van der Gaag is a longtime independent gender consultant and a senior fellow at Equimundo, a leading global organization engaging men and boys in promoting gender equality. She is the author of the 2017 book No-Nonsense Guide to Feminism, and 2014’s Feminism and Men. Amir Massoumian’s doctoral work focused on the far right in London. Following his thesis, “‘We Want Our Country Back’: Attitudes Toward Immigration in London Pubs,” he is currently focusing on aspects of masculinity, humor, and identity. Excerpted, with permission, from Patriarchy in Practice: Ethnographies in Everyday Masculinities (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).
Patriarchy in Practice: Ethnographies of Everyday Masculinities
Edited by Nikki van der Gaag, with coeditors Amir Massoumian and Dan Nightingale
268 pages

Patriarchy, bell hooks observed, “is the single most life-threatening social disease assaulting the male body and spirit in our nation.” In a world threatened by the hypermasculinity inherent in warmongering, and as country after country experiences the toxic effects of the resurgence of patriarchal values, it’s never felt so urgent to tackle the questions with which this book is concerned. Violence against women continues unabated.

The gains feminism claimed in the last 30 years are being threatened with the rise of neo-populism and its associated masculinisms. Even the term “feminist” is contested, as questions of gender identity have driven hard wedges between those who once saw themselves as sharing core values and purpose. It is a time to regroup, to rethink and to reconstitute forms of progressive politics that can suture the fissures that have appeared across and within movements inspired by the ideals of feminism and gender justice.

Patriarchy in Practice brings together papers initially assembled to address the possibility of post-patriarchal masculinities. But, as the editors observe, to talk of post-patriarchy at a time when the resurgence of noxious, regressive patriarchal views, practices and behavior is so evident may imply—wrongly—that we’re beyond the worst of it.

Like a virus, patriarchy replicates, mutates, infects and spreads faster than attempts to dispatch it or repair its effects. To talk of post-patriarchy is to conceive of a world that is difficult to imagine now; such a possibility appears to be fast receding the world over. Instead, the editors refocused on identifying and documenting a panoply of practices that, together, might give succor—and inspire hope—in a time of backlash. They and the other contributing authors explore how documenting the contemporary expression of masculinities, in all its particularity in different instances and locales, can provide an entry point for thinking in a more complex and nuanced way about the relationship between masculinity and patriarchy, and where and how that relationship can be redressed and reimagined.

The collection of cases in Patriarchy in Practice offers a dynamic constellation of contexts and possibilities for closer inspection, seeking to bring them together to identify alternative ways of being a man and performing masculinities. Doing so can aid in the possibility of imagining a post-patriarchal social order. The book takes a common research approach: using ethnography to examine the practices of everyday life. Ethnographic research produces fine-grained, contextually rich descriptions of life as lived. They offer powerful challenges to preconceptions and norms as they take the reader into worlds that they may never have encountered or imagined, enabling them to “see” and “hear” perspectives and experiences that might otherwise lie out of reach.

Through these ethnographies, in all their diversity, we are transported into the lives of a diversity of subjects and gain some fascinating insights into the very different worlds that are evoked through these studies. Annie Kelly’s “Alpha and Nerd Masculinities” looks at performative masculinities in anti-feminist digital cultures. “Phantom masculinities” is another variant of contemporary masculinities introduced by Amir Massoumian in his account of men in pubs in London’s borough of Walthamstow. It draws on reversals that are nostalgic and xenophobic by turns as they reflect on immigration in a time of Brexit. Alvi A. H. and Hendri Yulius Wijaya write of the “tenuous masculinities” of Indonesian transmen, who feel that it is only through constant reenactment that they can mitigate the risk of rejection and denial.

Others write of masculinities gained and lost, emerging and embodied. Shannon Philip’s essay on “new male heroes,” “new thinking,” and “new men” in New Delhi offers another trope, one familiar from the cultural contexts in which the global elite circulate, and one that can serve to entrench male privilege and misogyny. And Chris Haywood’s chapter on dark rooms in sex clubs in the UK speaks of the “loss of masculinity” as those who frequent them relate how they lose themselves in the pursuit of pleasure in these liminal, dark spaces.

Chapters by Christina Oddone, Ceri Oeppen, Elisa Padilla, Lucy Clarke and Debarati Chakraborty tackle a diversity of manifestations of masculinities—from the attitudes towards women in the accounts of French perpetrators of sexual violence, through the masculinities of drag icons, through the “moral-existential reconfiguration of masculinity” in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, through participation in sports, gaming, and role-play. They examine all the disabling ways in which patriarchal masculinities intersect with the bodies of the physically disabled, and the ways in which testosterone users reflect on the way they “masculinizing” hormone alters their bodily experiences.

Bringing together such an unusual and varied constellation of masculinities in the wider context of the struggle for gender equality, this collection complicates any straightforward association between men, masculinities and power. Together, these studies offer a rich contribution to the wider anthropological and sociological literature on masculinities. In their focus on the practice of patriarchy in such very disparate settings, they open windows into lesser-studied worlds and attest to the value of ethnography in surfacing voices and perspectives that are rarely heard.

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— Eve Ensler, playwright of The Vagina Monologues, founder of Vday

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