



Boyz 2 Men

Responsible Empowerment for
Inner-City Adolescent Males

by Jon Gilgoff

[“Can I have Kisses if I’m good?” Manny¹ asked, eyeing the bag of Hershey’s chocolate I had brought to our weekly Boyz 2 Men group for an icebreaker activity.](#)

I shook my head, knowing what was coming. As the Director of Gender-Based Programs for the Educational Alliance, a social service agency based in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, I had led too many boys’ and young men’s groups *not* to expect consequences when a guy asked for “kisses” from another guy. Though the purpose of such groups was to facilitate the responsible empowerment of males to develop healthy relationships within a just and equitable society, teasing and specifically homophobia-laced remarks were all too common in the sessions I led at the agency’s various youth centers. At Project TRY, an alternative education and drug treatment program for urban adolescents in recovery, the frequency and severity of this behavior was particularly high.

It therefore wasn’t surprising when the class erupted in laughter and side comments, with some students getting out of their seats.

“That sounded kinda funny,” Jerome said, bending over with his hands on his knees.

“Okay, okay,” I began, dejected but also heartened that the guys seemed to be at least avoiding the use of homophobic language. This consolation proved to be short-lived, however, as Manny quickly attempted to cover his “mistake” by saying, “No homo!”

In response, I reminded the guys of the group agreement we had created. The first rule was “Respect,” originally written as one word, then progressively amended by the group at my prompting to include, “for all people,” and then, “including females and homosexuals.”

Chiming in with a couple of half-hearted prompts of “C’mon y’all,” some of the more mature

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group members helped us move on. Until the last couple of sessions, however, the next interruption always seemed moments away. Unpacking the reasons for these reactions, in an attempt to prevent or at least minimize such stifling of free expression, became one of my goals as the Boyz 2 Men group leader.

The Man Box and Man-Hood

Such reactions to words or gestures perceived as being *kinda funny* constituted a definite and significant pattern, extending not only to accidental double entendres, but also to mannerisms seen as effeminate. Verbal expression of emotions was also strictly regulated under unspoken but powerful expectations, variously referred to as the Boy Code (Pollack, 1998), Codes of Conduct (Canada, 1995), Codes of the Street (Anderson, 1999), and even more forcefully as Commandments (Marshall & Wheeler, 2000) for inner-city males of color. By raising participants' awareness of the limits traditional gender socialization placed on their behaviors and creating a safe space to step out of this constricting "man box," Boyz 2 Men aimed to provide a positive alternative to drugs as a means of coping with the multiple challenges these young men faced.

There was a sense of urgency in helping as many as possible. Moving into what one participant described as their "man-hood"—that is, growing up male in the inner city—participants had fallen into substance abuse. Many had also joined gangs and already were involved in the criminal justice system. They were constantly threatened with being remanded to court and possibly to prison—not to mention the risk of injury or death—if they slipped up again. Nearly one in three black males between the ages of 20 and 29 is under some form of criminal justice supervision on any given day (Mauer, 1999). In some inner cities, homicide is the leading cause of death among minority adolescent males (Foy & Goguen, 1998). In this dire context, the struggle simply to keep young men of color "alive and free" (Marshall, 2005, p. 1) into their adult years is a challenge.

Boyz 2 Men was one gender-based program that aimed to build boys' resilience in the face of such dangerous realities and to help them examine their socialization as males. It created a safe space in which participants could freely express their hopes and fears, supporting one another toward a safer and healthier manhood. My experiences as facilitator of Boyz 2 Men

illustrate both the promise and the challenges of such efforts. In this article, I will examine the ways in which the group helped participants explore both the pressures and privileges of growing up to be a man in the 'hood, and how for some this process led to fuller expressions of self and increased responsibility in their treatment of others.

Project TRY and the Birth of Boyz 2 Men

A program of the Educational Alliance, Project TRY helps youth not just to survive the perils of their neighborhoods, but to thrive in spite of them. It offers participants education toward completion of their GEDs or high school diplomas, as well as counseling and case management to help them stop using drugs and address underlying issues.

Project TRY participants range in age from 15 to 21 and are almost entirely Latino/a and African American.

Though participants attend TRY voluntarily, urine sample results and student progress are reported to probation officers or other court officials for youth involved in the criminal justice system. Participation is thus mandated for some youth in the sense that failure to follow the TRY program could

result in even more severe loss of freedom. In terms of sexual orientation, not one participant made any reference, publicly or privately, to me about being gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning. Students spoke jokingly of one past TRY participant who was gay, with the unlikely implication that no one since then was anything but heterosexual.

I initiated gender-specific programming as a social worker through the Educational Alliance afterschool program at P.S. 64 during the 2003–2004 school year. Student participation and satisfaction were high enough to inspire the Educational Alliance and me to write a grant to bring the program to other sites, including Project TRY, the following summer and school year.

During the initial summer cycle at Project TRY, results were similarly positive. Program enrollment was naturally low and consistent. I was co-facilitator with on-site counselors, delivering the group twice a week as well as attending program meetings and outings. Some of the aspects that made the summer session successful, unfortunately, were not possible when the program was extended through the school year at multiple sites. For example, I could facilitate Boyz 2 Men at Project TRY for

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only one hour a week rather than two. I also lost the support of the on-site counselors, who, as men of color, could often connect more readily with participants than I, a white middle-class man, could do. Enrollment also became a challenge in the fall, growing to an unmanageable 17-to-1 participant-to-staff ratio before we closed the group at 10 in the spring 2005 semester, the period during which I gathered the data presented in this article.

In examining how homophobia and the man box affected the communication in Boyz 2 Men, I will cite the words various participants offered in group meetings and particularly the insights Manny offered in one-on-one interviews. Though Manny is clearly a success story—he dared to step out of the man box on multiple occasions and graduated from Boyz 2 Men bound for Job Corps—the main reason he serves as our guide is his ability to analyze behaviors as only a professional sociologist or an extremely resilient youth could do.

The Boyz 2 Men Curriculum

The Boyz 2 Men curriculum had as its goal responsible empowerment of male youth. Grounded in a strength- and asset-based perspective consistent with best practices in social work and youth development, it sought not only to facilitate individual growth and foster healthy relationships and coping skills, but also to raise participants' awareness of social injustice and enhance their ability to engage in community and social change.

Rationale

As gender-based programs have for decades helped girls grow into assertive and successful young women, more recently programs such as Boyz 2 Men have attempted to facilitate the healthy development of males by helping them question their own gender socialization. Because appearing soft or weak does not go along with the traditional cowboy or gangsta image of a strong and powerful man, male emotions often pass through what Kivel (1999) calls the "feelings funnel," in which anger is expressed even if behind it lies shame or jealousy or disappointment. When a male expresses emotions or associated behaviors seen as "unmanly," he is often called derogatory names used to describe femininity or homosexuality. In response to such name-calling and the general rigidity of gender socialization, males may

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attempt to "prove their manhood," not only by disassociating themselves from perceived non-masculine behavior, as in the Kisses episode, but also through posturing or real violence. Since males are perpetrators of many types of violence, including not only fighting but also intimate partner abuse and gay bashing, facilitating a strength based on power that is not expressed in control *over another* is both responsible empowerment and responsible practice.

As an example of the sense of authority that males enjoy in our society, one Boyz 2 Men participant, when asked what makes being a young man easy, responded, "Doing anything you want." Yet while Boyz 2 Men participants did enjoy many privileges based on their gender, they still had to deal with the pressures of the Boy Code and the harsh realities of inner-city life for male youth of color. In our conversations, the young men of Boyz 2 Men were keenly aware of such socio-economic and legal barriers to success, citing: "The pigs and you can't do a damn dollar," and "When I got locked up and I thought you had to be grown to go to [prison]."

In response to the inner city's few legal money-making opportunities and high levels of police presence and incarceration, one participant reflected, "It's crazy and difficult with everything around you and you watching it go by." Watching all the craziness go by, Boyz 2 Men participants had arrived at Project TRY because they had dropped out of school and started using drugs. Like many who suffer from "the secret legacy of male depression" (Real, 1997), participants got high in part as an escape from their difficult situations and the vulnerable emotions they may have felt they could not express safely.

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Models

To assist participants in their development as responsible men in the 'hood, I relied on models that sought to empower males and to hold them accountable for their

individual behavior while examining the context of oppression, social justice, and social change.

One organization whose afterschool work helped inspire Boyz 2 Men was Harlem-based Brotherhood/Sister Sol, whose mission is to develop critical thinkers committed to themselves and to community change (Wilcox, Lazzare-White, & Warwin, 2003). The Brotherhood/Sister Sol approach to responsible empowerment includes curriculum units on “Leadership Development” and “Pan-African and Latino History” as well as “Sexism and Misogyny.” Another model was Men Can Stop Rape, based in Washington, D.C., whose Men of Strength clubs provide support and develop skills for male youth to feel strong without being violent.

Influenced by themes in the field of domestic violence, and specifically batterers’ intervention groups, Boyz 2 Men aimed to help participants derive their sense of power and control from healthy sources such as art and education. This goal meant that, as facilitator, I could not condone participants’ sexist and homophobic comments, or even collude by my silence. Fulfilling this goal was often a challenge.

Curriculum and Activities

Part of overcoming this challenge was to avoid the issues altogether by engaging participants in typical afterschool program activities that created a positive environment of healthy self-expression, sharing, and respect for others. While Boyz 2 Men aimed to prevent such behaviors as intimate partner abuse, peer violence, early and unwanted pregnancies, and substance abuse, it was, after all, a voluntary afterschool group. Students could choose to return from lunch for my program or not. It was therefore important to make the sessions as engaging as possible.

When I asked participants what they wanted from our sessions, their responses were typical: trips, sports, and interaction with females. In terms of topics, they wanted to discuss relationships, gangs, drugs, and incarceration. All these requests were fit into ten curriculum components, designed from many experiences but strongly influenced by my work with Legacy International’s Global Youth Village, a cross-cultural camp in Bedford, Virginia, which had consistently served as a useful guide for my clients on their journeys from past to present to future:

- Team, Trust, and Identity Building
- Male Gender Socialization
- Peer Relationships
- Partner Relationships

- Family Relationships
- Coping Skills
- Education and Employment
- Community Activism
- Global Awareness
- Graduation

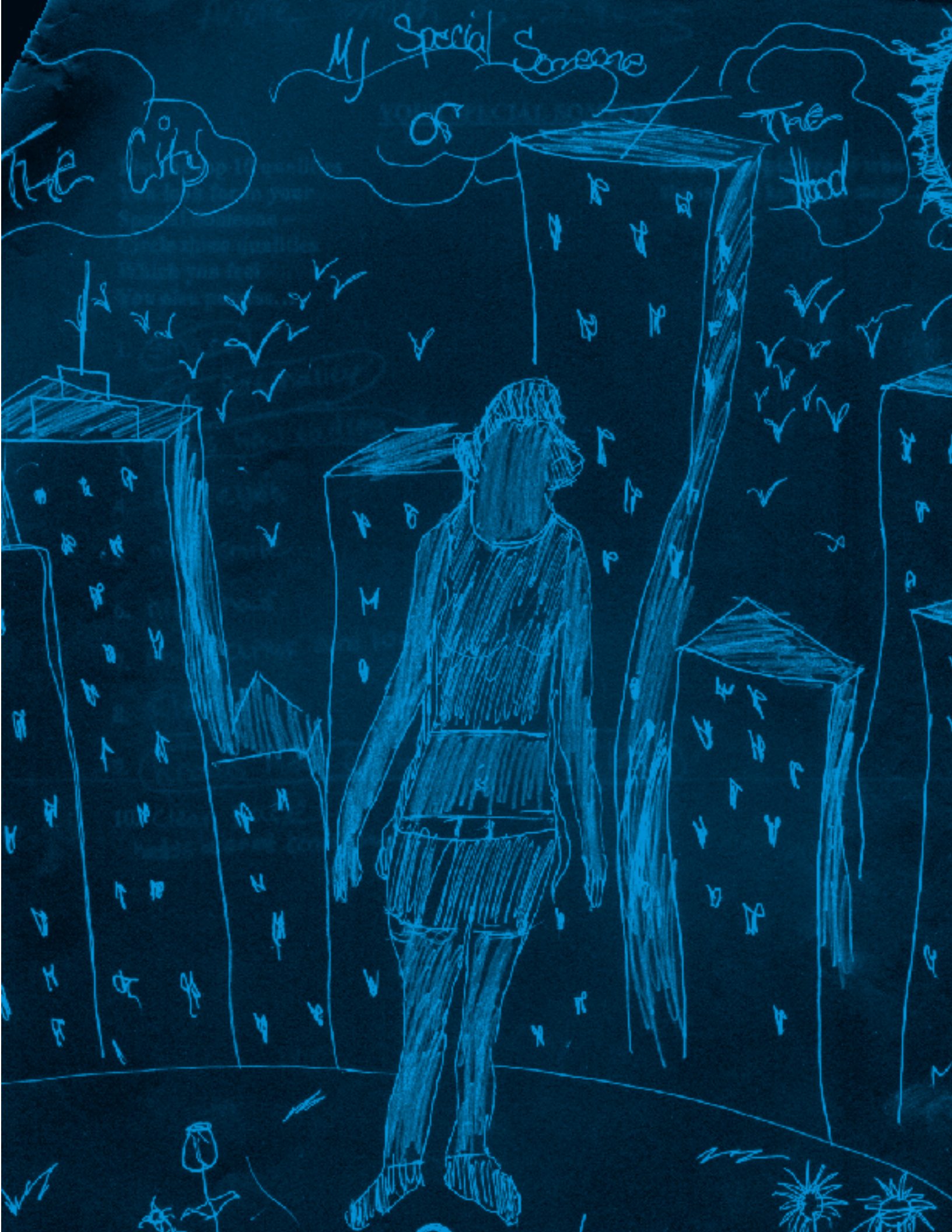
We generally spent two weeks on each topic in a five-month school semester. Though groups were run therapeutically, the Boyz 2 Men format was more like a workshop than like counseling. I used culturally based activities drawn from rites-of-passage programs as well as media literacy and arts activities. Interactive exercises were frequently used to explore such topics as the man box and the feelings funnel. I responded to the participants’ responses on the kinds of activities they preferred in a variety of ways. Interaction with female students included a lunch and outing to a cultural museum outside our regular group time, as well as two joint sessions with a local hip-hop/theater troupe. Boyz 2 Men participants also took a field trip outside our normal sessions to attend a domestic violence conference workshop. For sports, I distributed two free baseball tickets to the members, many of whom then asked other Project TRY clients, male and female, to come with them. Such activities gave participants valuable practice in applying the information and skills learned in group, while the counselors had a chance to coach them through this process.

In theory, groups began with a check-in, followed by a proverb or *dicho* (traditional Spanish saying) related to the topic of the day. Sessions continued with a core activity such as a ritual, video screening, or drawing or writing exercise. I then facilitated a dialogue based on the activity, and the group closed with participants reflecting on what they learned and expressing any final thoughts they wanted to share.

In practice, leading discussions in Boyz 2 Men often felt more like dentistry than social work. Participants were understandably hesitant to express themselves in front of their peers. Because “Thou shalt get thy respect” (Marshall, 2005, p. 9) is one of the most important commandments of the street, many chose not to risk the ridicule Manny endured for his verbal *faux pas*.

Unpacking Sexism and Homophobia

In order to better comprehend students’ use of homophobic language to disclaim or cover up non-traditional behavior, I asked students what the term “no homo” meant to them.



My Special Someone

of

The Hood

The City

“People just saying that because they got dirty minds, first of all. Sometimes they just saying that to hype something up,” Manny suggested.

“It’s kinda like a game,” said Vince.

“It’s usually funny,” Enrique concurred.

Behind such surface reasons, however, lay the homophobia implicit in one student’s comment that it “just doesn’t sound right.” Of the use of homophobic language, Manny said, “They hype it more in the ‘hood.” King and Hunter (2004) describe the results of such negative reactions to homosexuality in the African-American community: Black men who sleep with men often identify as “straight” and live a secret life “on the down low.”

During my initial conversations with the TRY administration around using clients as research participants, administrators expressed concern over another reason program participants might be uncomfortable with issues of sexuality. Some participants had known histories of child sexual abuse, while others had spent time in all-male group homes or detention facilities, where, as Gilligan (1996) notes, male-on-male violence and sexual violence occurs but often goes unreported. Though male-on-male sexual abuse is in no way equivalent to homosexuality, and in fact I tried to help participants distinguish between the two, the concern they expressed that

other men would try to “get up on them” seemed to influence their behavior. Even though none shared publicly any abuse they had suffered, a few participants angrily related occasions when they had experienced unwanted verbal or physical advances from other males. Of course, one of my private reactions was to note the hypocrisy of this complaint from males who I’d seen “hit on” uninterested females. Besides facilitating their understanding of such double standards, however, I also learned to be sensitive to their discomfort and fears.

Developing Trust

Based on respect for their experience and safety, I always gave group members the right to participate or pass, though I continually confronted expressions of sexism or homophobia. Since every session centered on a writing, art, or media activity, participants could express themselves privately even when they chose not to share.

One such activity was a letter-writing exercise, part of the unit on coping skills. Participants wrote letters to someone with whom they’d been in conflict, attempting to express their feelings, empathize with the other person, and identify ways to move forward. One participant, Travis, had publicly spoken with bravado more than once about how he had convinced his girlfriend to get an abortion because he didn’t want the child. In this writing exercise, he admitted to different feelings: “I felt sad, because that can hurt the girl inside.” The influence of Travis’s peers may have been a factor in this admission. The group had made clear during the previous week’s session on family their disapproval both of men who fathered children but were unprepared to be responsible parents and of men who pressured women into abortions as a quick fix for unwanted pregnancies. Members had begun to do what young men’s groups should do in response to irresponsible behavior: confront it.

Though at the outset participants were more apt to collude, toward the end of the term they began to replay some of the Boyz 2 Men messages. This process showed itself more clearly in relation to sexist than to homophobic remarks. Participants identified their use of the word “bitch” to describe females as a “bad habit,” which they then attempted to unlearn. When classmates used this

word, Jerome could be heard quoting Queen Latifah’s song “Unity,” which we’d listened to, singing, “Who you callin’ a bitch?” This is one example of how I helped participants develop their media literacy to raise their awareness of the messages behind popular song lyrics and their own sexist statements. Holding one another accountable, the group used the phrase “that’s nasty” to put a stop to remarks that referred to women in sexually degrading ways.

To facilitate participants’ development as allies in the struggle to end sexism, we attended a conference whose topic was preventing violence against women as part of the education and employment unit. Though at the outset participants seemed more interested in flirting with the female volunteer checking them in, in the workshop they engaged with the material. By the end, they were the stars of the group, showing off their media literacy skills through active participation in a discussion



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of how music videos and advertising affect violence against women. That the Boyz 2 Men group was able to move through a transitional phase of resistance around the issue of respect for females to a more responsible and productive working phase is representative of group process generally (Corey & Corey, 1997).

According to Manny, a major determinant of whether students could safely express themselves, or whether they would resist by remaining silent or disrupting the process, was the topic under discussion. Finding topics that were engaging to participants, ones that dealt with their “man-hood,” but were not so personal as to make them feel vulnerable, was key.

Jon: If you were a student researcher, if you had to pick a pattern, what consistently happens in the Boyz 2 Men group, what would you pick?

Manny: I don't know. That's a big-ass job. You gotta think. Because sometimes you gotta think of a subject that don't affect them in a bad way, that also could let out things in a good way... Like you don't want to pick a subject that everybody gonna be like, “I don't want to talk about it” because it's personal things. But then you also want to pick a subject, that's something we relate to.

Manny identified gangs as such a subject, remembering a session on peer relationships in which we watched a video about a young spoken-word artist who uses his writing to survive gang conflicts in prison: “It was a good subject because it attached to my personal stuff. Things that really going on. But it wasn't too personal, or too boring, like right there, on the spot.”

Another engaging and safe topic was partner relationships. For instance, all group members actively participated in an exercise in which they drew a picture of where they'd meet their ideal partner. A couple of students were bold enough to share that they would meet that person in the park, because they liked nature, or at the library, because they wanted to date someone smart. These traditionally “manly,” and therefore safe, topics of gangs and women inspired fairly free expression with few homophobic comments. If homophobic remarks were for the group a way to “hype things up” and “just a game,” it was a game they played when groups became boring. Pro-

viding consistently engaging topics was one way to combat participants' unhealthy coping mechanisms.

Confronting Homophobia's Continuing Presence

Progress in participants' ability to speak respectfully about women did not bring similar progress in their communications about homosexuality. Homophobic expressions continued up until the last few sessions, when a number of students stopped attending. For example, in one session guest hip-hop teaching artists facilitated what is called playback theater: A group member shares a personal story, and other participants represent the story's emotions non-verbally. To represent the happy feeling of a participant's story, Sergio jumped up and clicked his heels.

“Gay!” Vince screamed out, shocked.

“Faggot!” Miguel shouted to laughter. “[He] clicked his heels!”

After the group briefly considered how frequently Vince and Miguel made homophobic remarks and the severity of this particular incident, I sent the two home for the day. As they knew preparations for graduation were beginning the following week, it's not surprising that Vince and Miguel didn't choose to attend the last sessions.

The remarks of a few individuals, however, were only part of the story. Participants' reactions to me as the group leader were another, as Manny explained:

Jon: So why is it that people put on that attitude if at least for some of them really they are engaged or really they are interested?

Manny: Sometimes people think like what other people are going to say. Like, “Oh, he's soft. He's in that group. Jon's favorite boy.” [He winks.] It goes by what other people say so that's one of the reasons they put a front.

Jon: Do people say that about the group?

Manny: Yeah, like last time, we was over here having group. The guys came upstairs... Jerome, and all those guys. They was like, “Oh, go to your daddy, Jon. [He winks again.] So things like that could piss somebody off and like, “I don't want to be in this group.... They going to talk shit if I go to group.” And if they do come, they put a front.

Providing consistently engaging topics was one way to combat participants' unhealthy coping mechanisms.

Manny's comments reveal how some participants reacted to me as the Boyz 2 Men facilitator. A Caucasian man brought up in a middle-class section of Queens, I am not, as the Boyz 2 Men group correctly perceived, a product of the 'hood, despite the fact that I've worked for ten years in low-income urban communities of color. Our differences played out most obviously one day when a participant asked me a series of "have you ever..." questions: Had I ever been locked up, been stabbed, been shot at, or seen a friend die? Despite my best efforts to acknowledge and process our differences, the fact that I hadn't experienced any of this was an obstacle that kept the group from fully engaging. Moreover, though I am heterosexual, the way I expressed myself at times impressed the group as *kinda funny*. Participants' reactions to me as the sole group leader made the loss of my on-site co-facilitators—one Latino, the other African-American—particularly disappointing. With the on-site facilitators present, the group tended to get into the material more quickly and consistently, with less diversion. Kicking off our discussions by modeling how men of color could express vulnerable emotions and be respected not in spite of, but because of, their disregard for the rules traditionally governing male behavior, these counselors created the safety for participants to follow their example.

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Progress

On the last day of Boyz 2 Men, I wanted to reward the four participants who had stuck with the program the entire five months, while others had stopped coming and started razzing them for their participation. As one of their graduation gifts, I brought the group a plant. Besides providing the young men with a safe way to express caring, the plant would give them an ongoing opportunity to practice libation, a ritual we had performed in which pouring water both gives life to the plant and honors deceased relatives, fallen peers, public icons, and others who are no longer with us.

I expected group members might only say thank you, if that, not daring to admit they might like the traditionally feminine enterprise of gardening. But Manny unabashedly shared that his mother kept plants and described his long and significant involvement in their upkeep. To my surprise, the other students did not take

the opportunity to tease but listened intently, nodding their approval.

In the libation, we called out to ancestors to connect with us on this important day. We proceeded, without interruption or lack of focus, to reflect on our time together and share plans for the future. Participants recited pledges explaining what they had learned—"anger management," "how to avoid the Army," "to learn from our mistakes," and to "be more careful how I express myself to people"—and how they intended to apply this knowledge. Lastly, certificates, gifts, and a celebratory meal were bestowed on the proud graduates.

Developing Afterschool Boys' Work

Given the success of the graduation, the question becomes how to make the first session more like the last.

Creighton and Kivel's facilitator guide to *Young Men's Work* (1998) helps to answer this question. The first session, "Power and Violence," is based on an exercise called "Who's Got Power?" which can help low-income male youth of color see that their gender gives them a great deal of power, but that they also belong to groups that are potential targets. This awareness can help them address obstacles while acting as allies to other groups facing systemic challenges, such as women and homosexuals. For facilitators like me whose privileged ethnicity

and socio-economic status may be a barrier, deconstructing an unjust system and acknowledging unfair advantages up front can help us ally with participants to reconstruct a more equitable relationship and thereby prepare us to influence society as a whole.

As I helped initiate and coordinate Boyz 2 Men, the need for organizations strictly dedicated to supporting boys' work became apparent. Girls, Inc., provides training and support for empowerment programs for females, but there is no Boys, Inc., to help practitioners develop responsible boys' programming. Boys' work professionals need to develop linkages with other boys' programs, as well as with those working with female and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning) youth, so they can learn from peers, work through differences, and celebrate commonalities. An example of such a coalition was the Partnership for After-School Education's Gender Affinity Group of

2004–2005, which convened youth workers representing these three overlapping constituencies to share best practices and organize a citywide conference. Such professional alliances are beneficial in that they can hold boys' work professionals accountable for the responsible behavior we aim to develop in our youth and allow us to work together toward long-term social change.

For those who do not work in gender-specific programs, there are many valuable ways to contribute to boys' healthy development. One is to create from an early age a safe environment in which boys can express non-traditional behaviors, being patient and supportive as the boys develop the necessary trust. Another is to hold boys accountable for responsible words and actions: not to let one more “no homo,” “that’s gay,” or “this bitch I was messing with” go by without confronting and processing it. To help boys express their full selves, we can look for and name the behaviors that perpetuate the counterproductive man box. We can take advantage of teachable moments to raise awareness that such rigid socialization is ultimately harmful both to the individual and to society. We can engage youth in responsibly reconstructing their words and actions, freeing them to express their full selves, and from there involve them in a larger movement to create greater equity and justice in their world.

Boyz 2 Men helped at least one participant make significant internal and external shifts. Manny expressed in an interview that he had gained the courage and the knowledge to publicly remove the mask of traditional masculinity and pursue a more peaceful and productive life.

Manny: The group really like made me think how I talk to people and how I react, towards females, towards males.... It's like I learned a new way how to react, to express myself.... Before, I was just disrespectful; you know, “I don't care what people think. I'm going to talk how I want to talk.” Now, if I want to meet new people and I want to have friends and I want to have somebody to talk to I should approach them in an educated way.

Jon: And what about the group made you make that shift?

Manny: I don't know. It's like the group.... It's like a step forward on your manhood. It's perfecting your ways of being as a boy or a man.

“It's like a step forward on your manhood. It's perfecting your ways of being as a boy or a man.”

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¹ All participants' names are pseudonyms.