

Boys to Men? The Crisis in Teenage Masculinity

A One Hour Documentary for Television

Caught between a macho past and a feminist future, adolescent boys are not being initiated and mentored into rounded, emotionally expressive, mature masculinity. The stories of these boys will show why, and point out what needs to be done.

Boys To Men? The Crisis in Teenage Masculinity

A Film By Frederick Marx

When you look at the kinds of kids who are in trouble in terms of - you name it - drugs and alcohol, suicide, attention-deficit disorder and learning disabilities, the prevalence statistics are so skewed toward boys that it's enough to knock you over. Dan Kindlon, *Raising Cain*

The confusions that arise in young males as they try to reconcile the traditional masculine values of their fathers, for example, with a postfeminist culture that celebrates sensitivity and openness have created a 'national crisis of boyhood.' Stephen S. Hall, "The Troubled Life of Boys", *NY Times Magazine*, Aug. 15, 1999.

There *is* a crisis of masculinity today among American boys. They don't know who they are as adolescent boys because they don't know who they're supposed to become as adult men. Surrounded with images of Arnold Schwarzenegger/Sly Stallone male manques on one side and Homer Simpson incompetent buffoons on the other, they don't know if they're supposed to be new action heroes or deferential wimps. What's more, what historically has happened to women and girls is now happening to men and boys: their bodies are becoming objectified. They're being bombarded with messages of bodily insufficiency and inadequacy: "Receding hairline?" "Facial imperfections?" "Small penis?" "Inadequate musculature?" "Need Viagra?!..." Plastic surgery for males is rising at 3 times the rate for women, with liposuction the operation of choice. And now, following the lead of their male adult counterparts who murder at random to express their rage, high school shootings like those in Littleton, Colorado and Springfield, Oregon are proliferating.

It's boys who are doing this, because of this code about what they can say and can't say, how they feel about their body self, how they feel about their self-image, how they feel about themselves in school. William S. Pollack, *Real Boys*.

90 percent of the violent crime committed by people younger than 18 is committed by boys. What we have is not just a crisis of violence, but a crisis of violence among young males. Marjorie Williams, *Washington Post*, 4/28/00.

In the midst of what Susan Faludi - in her landmark new book *Stiffed* - calls "ornamental culture", where substantive images of positive, meaningful male behavior have been replaced by total consumerism, where masculinity means "looking great, feeling great, being great," where a boy's only measure of success is celebrity and he must compete with his peers to achieve it, boys are not healthfully bonding, they're not being mentored, they're not acquiring important values of loyalty, service, and authenticity. And it's contributing to a break-down in the very fabric of life in their communities.

Most pundits and institutions directly or indirectly blame boys themselves. But not ***Boys To Men? The Crisis in Teenage Masculinity***. This is a film that sides with teenage boys, that empathizes with their struggles, that sees the dearth of meaningful support and guidance they receive, and that ultimately seeks to offer them a positive new model of mature masculinity.

Boys To Men? The Crisis in Teenage Masculinity

A Film By Frederick Marx

Background

As a filmmaker with a long history of social engagement, working with teenage boys is one of my passions. In the film *Hoop Dreams* I followed the lives of two teenage boys from middle school through high school into college. In *Higher Goals* I intermixed the stories of two teenagers, one a girl, with another fictional teen character and two adults, to shed light on the issues inner city youth face balancing their love of basketball with academics. Both of those films made clear to me that boys are not receiving adequate mentoring and guidance. Too many life-altering decisions are left for them to make alone. Worse, too many adults are only too happy to use them for their own ends. I also personally relate to the plight of teenage boys. I myself was a confused and "difficult" teenager, struggling with drug abuse and delinquency, living in a fatherless household. *Boys To Men? The Crisis in Teenage Masculinity* is a logical continuation of my professional and personal work to understand my own adolescent life and others'.

My filmmaking *style* is also ideally suited to this subject. I am a story-teller, not a journalist or propagandist. I use the deep complexities and occasional contradictory realities of my subjects' lives to frame social issues, not the other way round. Using real people as fodder for an intellectual or social agenda is ethically questionable, no matter how commendable the intention. Through careful research and pre-production I choose my subjects based on their most likely story trajectories. Then I work in a modified "cinema verite" style, following my subjects in their daily lives, shooting scenes I've pre-selected for thematic reasons, but letting the dramatic action flow from their usual activities. Through extensive interviews, I then afford each subject the opportunity to narrate his/her own story. In this way I'm able to present social issues of importance while fully respecting the idiosyncracies and happenstance of everyday life along with the integrity of each individual's point of view.

With *Boys To Men?* I want to pick up where, in some ways, *Hoop Dreams* left off: what is it that is missing in the maturation of boys? Why is the transition into adult masculinity becoming more difficult rather than less? What guidance needs do these young people have and how, if at all, are they being met? This film begins the search for solutions. The program will lay bare that "manliness" is a symbolic script that is culturally determined and not always necessary, much less necessarily helpful in a boy's life.

Boys To Men? will also subtly elucidate how much of behavior is culturally derived, how diverse cultures express and regard masculinity differently. For example, while in both dominant European-American culture and African-American culture it is considered demeaning for a man to do the work of a busboy, this is not the case in Latino culture where such work can be considered ennobling if a man is supporting his family. To explore this cultural diversity (and reflect our national diversity) *Boys To Men?* will film boys from different cultures, including Latino, African-American, Asian, and European-American. But unlike the cliché from Hollywood World War II movies, the final film will not reflect a "one of each" mentality. The completed film will feature the most revealing personal stories *regardless of the racial mix.*

Boys To Men? The Crisis in Teenage Masculinity

A Film By Frederick Marx

Research indicates that economic and social class is a much greater factor than race. "The greater the 'net worth' of a youth (the value of possessions acquired with his own money), the more the youth is at risk for these destructive activities [of juvenile delinquency and drug abuse]." (Brendtro, Brokenleg, Bockern, *Reclaiming Youth at Risk*) Multiple shootings also seem to be proliferating more in upper middle class neighborhoods, suggesting that unexpressed rage may be proliferating there as well. So boys with differing class backgrounds will be featured in ***Boys to Men?*** and reflected in the final mix of stories. Whatever their class and race differences however, the program will make clear that these boys have more in common than not. Their separate struggles may take different forms, but the struggle itself to find an acceptable masculine self-image is universal.

The Newark, N.J. area where I will make this film is a perfect fit with my artistic objectives and interests. Though predominantly African-American (58%), the community is multi-cultural with a large Latino population (20%) along with a large new Asian community and an aging Jewish populace. Newark is a largely working class community "on the rebound," not unlike Chicago's West Side where I spent many years on the ***Hoop Dreams*** project. Underserved, "underdog" communities like this one are my lifelong obsession. And certainly this community, when combined with its suburbs, is as representative as any when it comes to contemporary issues of boys and masculinity.

Boys To Men? will serve a double function: the process is as important as the product. I intend to use the entire project as a vehicle for mentoring young people in the practice of filmmaking, from research through to final post. I will draw on community partners Rutgers Univ., New Jersey Institute of Technology, Communities in Schools, and Community Partners for Youth to provide crew members (including boom operators, gaffers, grips and PAs), research and editing assistants, etc. This intention reflects a number of my ongoing commitments: to keep costs down, to humanize the often brutalizing filmmaking process, to "walk my talk" by mentoring young people, and to build community development into the very method of the film's making.

Already supported by The Newark Museum, and with commitments from the partners above, the project Advisory Board is already in place. Additional Board members include the Newark Public School Board and New Jersey Network (PBS Newark). In addition to providing apprentice crew members and interns, the Advisory Board will help fulfill three additional objectives: to advise the shaping of the film's content, to facilitate institutional access throughout Newark, and to support solicitation efforts of in-kind goods and services.

Treatment

Boys To Men? The Crisis in Teenage Masculinity

A Film By Frederick Marx

In this hour-long program for TV, ***Boys To Men?*** will follow the stories of five boys over a period of 3-4 months, from the end of the Spring 2000 school year through summer vacation and into the Fall 2000 semester. Each subject will cross a significant threshold event during this period, an event defining his perception of self, of his own masculinity: the big game, the big test, the big date or the big break-up, the move to a new place, the school trip, the illness of a friend, the doctor's appointment, joining or quitting a gang, getting and keeping, or perhaps quitting a summer job, learning to drive, attaining a 16th birthday... these are just some of the possibilities. One of these watershed moments will provide the climax of each boy's story. Leading up to that key event, we will see the youngster interact with those around him, adults in particular, in an effort to resolve his fears and concerns. We will also hear their views, the key players in his circle, about the upcoming event. That way the key decision(s) the young man finally makes during the threshold event will be placed in a context that highlights his masculine perception of self.

Those are the film's key narrative elements. The key story *issues* are these: Where do these teens derive their images of masculine behavior? How do they respond to them? What if any guidance are they receiving from elders? In what ways does peer bonding substitute for mentoring?

As the first step, ***Boys To Men?*** will film four "focus groups" of 7-8 teenage boys as they discuss the following issues (and more):

- *Body self-image*: How do you feel about your height, weight, looks, body hair, muscles, etc? Is how you feel about yourself solely determined by how others treat you? Does anyone give you positive reinforcement about your looks? "Traditionally, one of the hallmarks of masculinity is the demonstrated ability to repress pain. It is unmasculine to ask for help." (Kipnis, *Angry Young Men*) Talk about how this is true/untrue for you.
- *Peer bonding*: "Most young men desperately feel the need to be connected to some sort of 'tribe' - a Church group, the boy Scouts, an athletic team - or, without a positive option for membership - a gang." (Kipnis) Do you have the "tribe" you need? A healthy, supportive one? What constitutes it? How does the presence of women and girls impact it? When is touching another boy acceptable or unacceptable to you?
- *The meaning of work*: What does work mean to you? Is it just to make a buck? Can it have any positive value - building confidence? Acquiring skills? Learning teamwork? Does creating something on your own, with your own hands, have any special value for you? "A job is no longer a rite of passage to adult responsibility, but a way of celebrating the materialism of the selfish society." (Brendtro, Brokenleg, Bockern, *Reclaiming Youth at Risk*)
- *Violence and anger*: Say you get super-angry with a parent or teacher, what do you do with your anger? Do you just sit on it and hope it will go away? What do you think causes teenage violence? What forms of it are acceptable? Unacceptable? "Defiance towards adults is often a fundamentally healthy reaction to a pathological

Boys To Men? The Crisis in Teenage Masculinity

A Film By Frederick Marx

environment.” (Kipnis, *Angry Young Men*) What about hazing? How much goes on in your locker rooms during P.E. and sports?

- *Mentoring*: Who do you really look up to? Who’s your hero? Is anyone mentoring you? Giving you support and guidance? Who? Is it working? Why, or why not? "The lone male hero approach is a sure recipe for exhaustion and failure." (Kipnis)
- *Initiation*: Talk about the "growth experiences" or "life passages" you've experienced: Baptism? Confirmation? Bar Mitzvah? Getting a driver's license? Graduating middle school? Turning 16? Was your experience of these demonstrative of your readiness to step across the threshold into adulthood? Are you ready to leave childhood behind? Are you ready to leave your mother, father, and siblings to step into the world? If not, what's missing for you to make that possible?
- *Safety and power*: Where do you go when you just need to be alone, to have peace and quiet? Where’s your safe place? (Is it a literal place in your house? At a friend’s? Or a metaphorical place inside yourself?) What would you do without it? Do you feel you have any power to impact your life, make changes? What would having power look like to you? "Deprived of opportunities for genuine productivity, lured into consumptive roles, young people come to believe that their lives make little difference in the world." (Brendtro, Brokenleg, Bockern, *Reclaiming Youth at Risk*)
- *The Boy Code*: "The boys we care for ... often seem to feel they must live semi-inauthentic lives, lives that conceal much of their true selves and feelings, and studies show they do so in order to fit in and be loved." (Pollack, *Real Boys*) What would you really like to say when someone asks "How are you?" What will happen if you say your true feelings and not "I'm fine," or "Everything's all right."? Talk about the names other boys will call you if you show your feelings, especially fear or sadness. How do your parents react when you're sad or afraid? Are you aware of having to live "the mask" that society forces on you? "When they violate or ignore the code in some way, society tends to let them know - swiftly and forcefully - in the form of a taunt by a sibling, a rebuke by a parent or a teacher, or ostracism by classmates." (Ibid.)

The purpose of shooting these discussions is twofold: to “cast” five subjects for the film from this pool of ~30 boys and to use the discussions as a kind of Greek chorus in the film proper. The hour-long program might even open and close with these “communal voices.” Stylistically, these segments will look like a classy network talk show (e.g., *Charlie Rose*). The lighting will fall off the subjects to produce a black backdrop, affording each boy's comments greater prominence and distinction. Without the baggage of specified setting, each boy will be established, in effect, as a high profile "expert." With all the boys sitting literally around a round table, the setting will also produce a sense of equality, intimacy and openness. ***Boys To Men?*** will return to segments from these discussions throughout the program to reinforce and elucidate the issues raised by the individual boys’ stories. The segments will provide both structural and stylistic pauses.

Boys To Men? The Crisis in Teenage Masculinity

A Film By Frederick Marx

The bulk of the film will look very different however, comprised of cinema verite scenes and interviews on location, in a style somewhat similar to ***Hoop Dreams***. Verite scenes from the boys' lives will be infused with VO from their own interviews. They will effectively narrate their own stories, along with their parents, siblings, and those closest to them. The intention is to have no third person omniscient narration. But if, like ***Hoop Dreams***, it becomes necessary to provide key narrative links, strictly for informational purposes, they will be provided. Also like ***Hoop Dreams***, the different boys' stories may be interwoven to comment on each other.

The verite stories will include boys reacting to authority figures, especially those in the media. Unfortunately, the media and their various "experts" only compound the difficulties boys face. They patronize them, by deigning to tell them what's wrong with them, not unlike educated white social analysts telling African-Americans what's wrong in *their* communities. Few media "experts" seem to listen to the boys themselves, to learn directly from them, to understand their problems from the inside. Perhaps that's simply part of the bigger picture - it seems that many, many adults deeply *fear* teenage boys. ***Boys To Men?*** will confirm whether boys in fact feel this is true. Contrary to the popular media stereotypes of teenage boys, ***Boys To Men?*** trusts their intelligence, articulateness, and openness to effectively and passionately communicate their feelings. And despite the quoting of various scholarly experts in this project proposal, for the film itself *the teenage boys themselves* will be the experts.

To reach teens, ***Boys To Men?*** does not need to simulate a "hip teenage TV style" ala MTV. Like ***Hoop Dreams***, ***Boys To Men?*** will relate stories in a clear, concise way. Contrary to what numerous "experts" say about teenagers' viewing habits, ***Hoop Dreams*** *does* keep teenagers riveted, at least those 15 and over. Of the thousands of school children and youth groups bussed to showings, of the millions more who watched it on TV, evidence indicates they remained attentive, enjoyed it, and more importantly, learned from it. Given that ***Hoop Dreams*** is also three hours long, I believe that success is noteworthy. Clearly, the right content is as much or more important to young people than style.

Audience and Distribution

The program will be of value to all those who work with teens, including: parents, teachers, social workers, counselors, coaches, employers, social policy makers, et al - in short, a good cross-section of the mid-30s and older adult audience who traditionally make up PBS viewership. But the primary audience for this film is teenage boys and girls.

The greatest value of ***Hoop Dreams*** and ***Higher Goals*** comes from young people getting a chance to see complex, frank, and sympathetic media representations of themselves. They're not idealized and made "correct," nor villified and made "wrong" - the two ways most media usually represent them. ***Boys To Men?*** will do the same. Boys will benefit from seeing the complex issues they face portrayed frankly and sympathetically. To name just two foreseeable benefits: feelings of alienation and desperation should lessen, and the desire for more conscious peer-bonding and guidance-seeking should strengthen.

Boys To Men? The Crisis in Teenage Masculinity

A Film By Frederick Marx

Girls too will benefit from experiencing the adolescent trials of their male counterparts, hopefully leading to new understanding and compassion for boys.

The best way to reach a teenage audience is through television. ***Boys To Men?*** will probably be too thoughtful and subtle for the networks or cable. Executives at The Learning Channel recently said “we’re in the entertainment business; if it’s not entertaining, we don’t want it.” That comment typifies the degraded condition of present-day broadcast and cable TV programming. Though ***Boys To Men?*** will be absolutely fascinating - in turns dramatic and funny, shocking and thought-provoking - the intention is not to “entertain” but to create a work of documentary art around a very pressing theme. Therefore, the best home for ***Boys To Men?*** will be on PBS.

Many people forget that ***Hoop Dreams*** was originally created for PBS. PBS should welcome another chance to reach this underserved audience. Though they do not have a strong track record with teens, experience shows that PBS works hard with programs that have well-funded, well-designed outreach plans. ***Hoop Dreams*** and ***Higher Goals*** both had significant nationwide outreach efforts. “Teacher’s Guides” were provided and major tune-in campaigns were realized. There were rallies, contests, school assemblies, benefits, and promotional events with inner city schools, both public and Catholic. Additional partnerships were forged with *Making History and Ourselves*, *The Center for the Study of Sports in Society*, and others. Due to a grant from Toyota Corp. of America, 4,500 copies of ***Higher Goals*** and Curriculum Guides were given away to select inner city schools nationwide.

Of course, if PBS refuses the program for any reason, there are other potential outlets for it, both domestically and abroad. Domestically, HBO and Cinemax, Bravo, Sundance, A&E, and the Discovery Channels are possible alternatives. Abroad, Channel 4, the BBC, SEPT/ARTE, and ZDF are just a few of the bigger name broadcast possibilities. I personally know all the relevant programming executives for all of the above channels and will pursue every available option for TV broadcast.

For video sale, the film will be best placed in the hands of a qualified distributor with a proven ability to not only reach young people with the program itself but to use it as a means for deeper processing and facilitation. Li Mun-Wah’s Stir Fry Productions, The Committee for At-Risk Youth, and Making History and Ourselves are three perfect models. These organizations always follow screenings with facilitation and processing from trained professionals. Only when young people themselves are changed, along with the adults who serve them, will the program fulfill its greater mission.

Conclusion

The problem of uninitiated men in our culture carries import that reaches beyond the development of the individual man and affects the well-being of our culture as a whole. A healthy transition from a culture that has been dominated by the patriarchy to one which reflects a new integration of feminine with masculine values is dependent on the

Boys To Men? The Crisis in Teenage Masculinity

A Film By Frederick Marx

freeing of the masculine psyche from its adolescent-bound state. In this mission, women have no less stake than men, for the lesson to be learned in the new age is that the individuation of the one is dependent on the individuation of the other. Jerome S. Bernstein, "The Decline of Masculine Rites of Passage in our Culture: The Impact on Masculine Individuation." *Betwixt and Between.*

The potential audience and impact for this film is huge. But it can be made for a very small sum. Mentoring young people in the filmmaking process, having them double as crew members, will help keep costs low. As mentioned, the Advisory Board will also be instrumental in providing in-kind goods and services: the New Jersey Institute of Technology will allow the film to be edited at no charge in their Digital Media Laboratory, and Rutgers University will provide producer housing, and access to students and some equipment. Shooting with what is essentially a home video camera will also save money on equipment rentals and tapes.

The project is already underway. ***Boys To Men?*** has received significant support from the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation's "Artists and Communities: Arts in the Millenium" Project. Teaming with The Newark Museum, I began a nine month artist's residency in Newark, N.J., on March 1, 2000. That grant covers my salary, and with Rutgers covering housing, it effectively reduces the overall budget by \$57,000. The actual \$125,000+ needed for production will be raised from Foundations and Individuals. Most media funders like ITVS, POV, CPB, and the Roy Dean Film Grant have already been approached. Issue-oriented funders like MacArthur, Ford and Rockefeller will be solicited. The Soros Foundation, one of the rare funders interested in both, has already been approached, as have smaller foundations like Puffin and Fleishhacker.

This film needs to be made now. Boys can't wait any longer. Nor can we adults.

The youth we are casting aside today are part of a small generation who will have to support a large cohort of retired citizens as the twenty-first century unfolds. We are literally abandoning the persons whom we will ask to support us in retirement.
(Brendtro, Brokenleg, Bockern *Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future*)