

BoystoMen?

A FILM BY FREDERICK MARX

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

“What is going on with teenage boys these days?!” That was the question I asked myself high over the Colorado Rockies on a flight from San Francisco to Newark. It was late June 1999. I was coming to meet administrators at the Newark Museum to discuss collaborating on an NEA project: “Artists and Communities, America Creates for the Millenium.” Later, the NEA did become the first piece of the funding puzzle for this \$400,000 film. On the plane, I had just finished reading two long magazine articles, one on the Columbine school shooting, and one on Matthew Shepherd’s murder. A simple troubling question weighed on me: “What is it that drives teenage boys to do these things?”

I already knew the statistics. Boys under 18 commit acts of violence nine times more than girls. They abuse drugs more. They’re doing worse in school and feel much less confident about succeeding in college. They are diagnosed as learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, suffering from ADD, at rates double, quadruple, and six times that of girls, respectively. And they’re put on medications like ritalin and prozac at rates far higher than girls. Girls dominate every non-sports related extra-curricular high school activity. The fact is that teenage boys are lagging behind girls in almost every meaningful statistical category. Why? What’s going on here?

The first step was to find 32 boys for the focus groups, all in the Newark area, all aged 15-16, but mixed across race, class and domestic living arrangement. In the Spring of 2000, I met with dozens of school administrators, counselors, after-school programmers, community organizers, health professionals, and religious leaders... in short, “the gatekeepers” who could provide the access I needed to young men. Then I met with over 80 youngsters, usually in groups of four or five, in all of the different settings above, and explained to them my project. If they were interested, I took a Polaroid snapshot of them and jotted down certain particulars about their family situation along with their contact information. Then I selected an initial target group of about 40 boys and made housecalls on all their parents. I explained the project to them, and for those who wanted their kids involved, I secured their signed permission.

The interviews were broken down into two hour blocks with eight boys each, and were shot in PBS’ Newark studios. We picked the boys up and drove them home, stuffed them with as much pizza and soda as we could, gave them Hoop Dreams tapes and posters, paid them nominal appearance fees of \$10 cash, and even held a drawing for a special hand-embroidered jacket.

Before each of the four interview sessions I did my best to put the boys at ease. I told them there were no right or wrong answers to the questions I would ask. I told them all I wanted from them was their deepest truth, spoken from the heart. I told them I preferred they make “I” statements, to talk about their own experience and not philosophize much about others’. I asked that they not give me answers they thought I might want to hear, and to not be “politically correct.” Then, right before beginning I asked for their “buy-in”, so I was

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assured they understood and agreed with my objectives. We went around the room and each boy said "yes, I'm in," or something to that effect. Later, during the discussions, I also liberally sprinkled in some of my own most painful childhood experiences in order to model the frank vulnerability I sought from them.

We had gathered a stunning mix of boys: 13 African-Americans (most Christian but some Muslim), 2 Africans, 8 Latinos (from Puerto Rico, Mexico, Portugal, Brazil, and Spain), 2 recent Russian-Jewish emigres, and 7 Caucasian boys (mixed between Jewish, Christian, and other backgrounds). Within each broad cultural grouping the boys ranged across class from welfare poor to trust fund rich, and reflected every conceivable family structure. I felt honored just to be sitting across from this beautiful rainbow of young faces and I told them so.

Most of the boys genuinely enjoyed the experience. They seemed hungry to be asked to share their feelings and experiences. This appeared to be true regardless of socio-economic background. Whether I was talking to an upper crust kid or a gangbanger, they all wanted to share. One of the hottest themes was the media's representation of teenage boys – how they're all lumped together as hoodlums or troublemakers. The boys seemed anxious to correct these and other misrepresentations that adults commonly held.

The interviews served multiple purposes. The primary one was to help me zero in on the exact subject matter I wanted to film. I also wanted the footage to bookend segments of the documentary's main narratives, like a Greek chorus commenting on the action. Lastly, I wanted to "screen test" the boys, to see which of the 32 might best serve as the five principal "cinema verite" subjects to be filmed starting in the summer: who was articulate, unintimidated by the cameras, willing to be vulnerable and open, and whose story, both in terms of background and upcoming events, seemed promising.

The interviews fulfilled all my greatest hopes and more. The youngsters were open, vulnerable, articulate, at ease, and full of insight. What I didn't foresee was the impact the interviews themselves would have on them. One of the strongest impressions I was left with was the desperate need for these boys simply to be respectfully heard. As youngster after youngster explained, just to be listened to non-judgementally was one of the best experiences they could have. Al-Tran Buie said it was the first time he'd ever experienced an adult white male taking any interest in his, a black kid's story. I came to understand how the interviews themselves constituted a significant act of respect and honoring for these boys, a real blessing.

I then chose five boys to begin filming in depth. That choice came relatively easily. In their own ways, all five stood out from the others. Each presented vastly different variations on the theme of growing up, with tremendous opportunities for comparison/contrast between them. There was an imaginative spark, an originality, and an articulateness that particularly struck me with Al-Tran, Charles, and Cisco. Wazn impressed me with his maturity and his story; for such a little guy in age and stature, he seemed convincingly reformed - from street hood to

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model peer leader. Spencer, on the other hand, made only two comments at his focus group session and seemed torpid and overmedicated. It was his story and his family dynamic that grabbed my initial interest.

In their own ways, each of the five boys embodied the central paradox I was looking for: exceptional averageness. On one hand they exhibited qualities that challenged stereotypes: they were thoughtful, vulnerable, articulate, sensitive, self-aware, and creative – very unmacho. Some would argue that these are exceptional qualities in teenage boys (though I would not). But I liked them as individuals and as potential subjects. (As a filmmaker, it's always important for me to work with people that I like, who I hope will "look good." That way, hopefully, when audiences later experience their suffering and defeats, they see the greater society that contributed to them; they don't see "good" or "bad" individuals.) At the same time, these "exceptional" boys had nothing in their family background, home, or school situation to indicate that they were anything other than "average."

Although it varied from boy to boy, we shot about nine months, collecting about 115 hours of footage from the five boys' stories. In addition, I gave each of the boys a mini-DV camera and an I-Mac computer. Although their cameras weren't quite as good, the mini-DV format was the same my field production crew used. With my assistance, the boys were able to develop rudimentary filmmaking skills. So they became partial co-creators of their own stories.

Their filmmaking was varied and revealed interesting differences in character. Though he loved the I-Mac and spent copious amounts of time on it, Spencer never seemed interested in the camera. I think for him the potential for self-created imagery is far less interesting than video games or movies. Al-Tran's tapes were either extremely confessional, very intimate diaries, almost like therapy sessions, or were performance pieces where he'd improvise dramatic hip-hop poetry. Both of these session types said a lot about his love of performing. He was usually the only person in them and except for wrestling, he rarely shot anything else. With his footage, I was always conscious of how conscious HE was about ME, and the film's eventual audience.

Cisco also used the camera for diary-like confessions, but these were off-handed and casually delivered in the wake of other objectives. He was probably the most creative in what he did with the camera: holding it at waist level for that walking confessional, shooting still photos and interviews of his family members and friends. Mostly, he seemed obsessed with his family, rightfully concerned about their influence on his emerging adulthood.

Editing took about nine months. Working from the extensive notes in my production journal, I was able to create a "paper cut" of each boy's story relatively easily. All five stories were assembled separately, initially creating five different mini-films. Each separate story assembly was 45-60 minutes long. Enthralled with the depth, complexity, and uniqueness of each story, I decided to proceed with all five stories in the final film. With that plan I began intercutting

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them. Two months later, faced with a rough cut of over 4.5 hours of bewildering complexity, I came to my senses and reluctantly eliminated Charles' and Wazn's stories. (Though it didn't necessarily lessen the impact for them, I did prepare ALL the boys for this possibility from the very beginning. I constantly warned them that I probably would not use all five stories in the finished film.) The bulk of the next six months was spent constantly eliminating and pruning story material to reduce each story to its essence, and continually reworking the story juxtapositions, like a Rubik's cube, to find the richest, most meaningful connections.

At the onset of filming, my plan was to identify a specific challenge facing each boy, then to see over time how that issue played itself out. Ideally, the challenge would be as literal as possible, something we could actually see occurring. If I was unable to identify a youngster's specific challenge, I would instead identify a "problem area." The challenges I was looking for were varied; I was open to just about anything. Here's how I wrote about it in my preliminary proposal: *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.*

Spencer Shefts presented the only "organic" story - faced with his coming brain surgery to relieve his epileptic symptoms. Of course, as subsequent events made clear, Spencer's story shifted to that of a "problem area," and became one about his feelings of humiliation and impotence on one hand, and about his violence, revenge, and domination fantasies on the other - none of which were resolved despite his successful surgery. Over time, I came to think of Spencer as the prototype Columbine kid.

As for the other two boys, I was left to gamble on their filming, to hope that the course of events over the coming six to nine months would present a story opportunity. In each case there was something in their family situation which I found intriguing. Eventually I found the stories I needed. Cisco's came to be about whether he would get back into school or not. AL-Tran's came to be about whether he could make it at St. Benedict's. But in the beginning, these stories were complete unknowns. I was heading off into the dark.