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Teen Boys earn 'ultimate' rites of passage

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When disillusioned youth bring guns to school, the reaction is to provide more metal detectors. Young Men's Ultimate Weekend (YMUW) provides an alternative. YMUW attempts to instill integrity and responsibility in young men by recreating the ancient ritual of a "rites-of-passage" initiation.

When his son was 15, Dr. Mark Schillinger, a San Rafael chiropractor, could sense a breakdown in communication. "I could feel my son couldn't get what he needed from me," said Schillinger. "At a certain point, I don't think sons can hear their parents anymore."

Reaching out for help, Schillinger took his son to Canada to participate in an initiation event. In the weeks following the event, he could sense a substantial change in his relationship with his son: their respect for one another and communication improved. "My son and I have a common language," said Schillinger. "We handle problems immediately and directly. We don't make it personal."

Schillinger received a uniform response from the members of his men's group. "We decided that we needed something like that here in our community," said Schillinger.

"There are so many parents with material wealth, but lacking in spiritual and emotional strength. There are special needs in affluent areas because young adults have a lot of material goods and parents have a false sense that their kids are ok... I know the kids are fine, but we want to show them they're ready to be men."

The word was spread throughout the Bay Area and more than 80 men attended the kick-off meeting. "We learned that there're a lot of fathers who also knew they needed help raising their sons," said Schillinger.

Together, they created the nonprofit organization World Institute for Human Development and began plans for the first YMUW.

YMUW bases its philosophy upon five words: respect, intelligence, gallantry, humor and true. The intention is to provide young men the tools and skills needed to be successful by allowing teens an opportunity to voice and convert their alienation, anger and negativity into positive strategies to better their lives and communities.

The event begins with a ceremony under the stars and a briefing about the expectations of the weekend. "We have the highest expectations for the young men," said Schillinger. "We are not going to nag them, we just expect them to participate."

On Saturday, the young men are given physical challenges, mental challenges and a team activity. They then participate in a two-hour question-and-answer session in which they can inquire about any aspect of life such as sex, drugs, and mom and dad. This exercise allows them to find out that they are not alone in their concerns.

At night, the young men are blindfolded and sent on a trust walk in which they hold onto the person in front of them and are led through the woods. When they reach the end of the walk, they engage in a grieving ceremony. "It's an opportunity to let go of the pain and anger of being a boy," said Schillinger. "They scream and yell and push up against other men. It's totally safe, we let them get it all out. Young men need to physiologically get it all out."

Saturday comes to an end around 2 or 3 in the morning when men from the community welcome the young men into manhood with a medallion and a handshake.

The activity starts back up at 6 in the morning on Sunday with a sweat lodge, an aboriginal ceremony where a dome is created out of willow branches and a fire is made in the center of the dome.

"There's something powerful about being in a sweat lodge, being in the womb of the earth," said Schillinger. "The young men pray and cry and realize their life is about themselves."

The event concludes with a sporting event in which the young men try to compete with the older men and a one-hour workshop for the parents that challenges the parents to live by high standards.

Young men who attend the event can continue their participation with YMUW through an ongoing mentoring program, reunion events and routine emails. Some young men also returned to the program as volunteers.

Since its inception, there have been 14 YMUWs that have served over 1,000 young men. The majority have taken place in Marin and Sonoma, but they have extended up into Washington and down to San Diego. Schillinger, along with fellow founders and board members Stephen Small, John Zeiter, and Corey McKinley of San Rafael, intends to make the program national and to have a Young Women's Ultimate Weekend and a Parent' Ultimate Weekend.

"We've observed through the program that young men are wonderful and want to do good. They feel back in touch with themselves. They need an opportunity to remember how great they are and bring that greatness back to the community."