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Enrique Arreola, Interventions Director, Mexican American Community Services Agency

WHAT MAKES A MAN

PROGRAMS HELP TEENS LEARN TO AVOID UNWISE CHOICES
DONNA LEIGH YANISH, Mercury News

When Paul Adrian Barragan-Vargas was growing up in San Jose, he watched his boyhood friends try to be men.

They joined gangs. They took drugs. They fathered children as teenagers.

When Sam Stagnara was growing up in Santa Rosa, he thought the better man had a certain type of shoe, wore an expensive watch and dabbled in drugs.

Both young men have learned new definitions of what it means to be a man. They each have gone through starkly different programs that ultimately have the same goal: Giving young men a moral compass to help guide them through their lives and relationships.

One, the Mexican American Community Services Agency, works with teens through an ongoing program; the other, the World Institute for Human Development, sponsors weekend retreats.

These efforts are essential, youth counselors say, because young men today see so many distorted images in movies, television and music that suggest money, physical strength, sexual conquests and respect built on fear define being a man.

"I can't think of another time in history that these things are in question more than they are now," says Gary Montrezza, executive director for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Santa Clara County.

Those media images affect all young men, not just those in poor neighborhoods. Teenage sons of more affluent families are confused as well, youth counselors say, often associating manhood with having money, expensive possessions and prestige.

"Being a man is being responsible. That's what makes a man," said Enrique Arreola, interventions director of the Mexican American Community Services Agency (MACSA).

Many young men struggle to prove their own worth and frequently they devise their own rites of passage.

The results can be disastrous. In July, a young San Jose man died after being slugged in the chest in a game he and his friends were playing to test their ability to withstand punches.

"It's viewed as a test of manhood," San Jose police Sgt. Steve Dixon said at the time.

It's an all-too-common example of the kind of risky tests teenage boys devise to show their masculinity.

"Growing up, a lot of things I saw as normal weren't normal," says Barragan-Vargas, 19. He had a strong family life, but "once I stepped off of the porch, it was there."

Barragan-Vargas says he avoided gangs because he had joined a program at MACSA

designed to help teenage boys develop a positive definition of manhood. Barragan-Vargas, then 14, learned self-respect and respect for others.

Beating the street

MACSA tries to take apart lessons learned on the street. The agency works with young Latino men, in some cases through a court mandate for troubled youths. Others come to the group voluntarily, like Barragan-Vargas.

"We try to bring out the morals they have within themselves," says Mario Ozuna-Sanchez, program coordinator for the agency's Male Involvement Program.

The first issue MACSA's program addresses is the treatment of women.

"We talk to them about honoring women above everything else in the world," Ozuna-Sanchez says. "Constantly in the world they're taught the opposite," he says. "But they value their mothers and their sisters. They need to value all women in the world."

After the young men complete the first stage of the program, they are honored with a small ritual and they cross over to the next stage. In that way, the program creates rites of passage.

Tied to valuing women is the responsibility of teenage fathers, a key mission for MACSA, which notes that only 20 percent of teenage fathers contribute financially and emotionally to their children's upbringing. It's an issue Ozuna-Sanchez knows well, having fathered a child at 15.

For Barragan-Vargas, a key reason he joined MACSA was that it offered a safe place to talk about feelings, something that was missing at home. "My father is a good man," he says, "but he was always working. It helped fill a void. Now I try to fill that void with my little brother" who is 14.

"There's a brotherhood that forms in the program," he says.

A program theme is the ability to talk about experiences, both good and bad. Barragan-Vargas says he listens to others and thinks about how he would respond in similar circumstances. "The emphasis is on living honorably," he says, "growing up to be a respectful man. Now it seems obvious, but it's not easy when you're scared."

Barragan-Vargas hopes to take the mentoring skills he has learned at MACSA and build a career around them. He is in his second year at the University of California-Davis, where he's majoring in English with a possible minor in Chicano studies; he wants to teach high school English.

Weekend retreat

While MACSA works regularly with young men, another program focuses on a weekendlong rite of passage. The Young Men's Ultimate Weekend is a coming-of-age program that provides intensive mentoring for boys ages 13 to 20.

The events, held most recently at a site in the Santa Cruz Mountains, are sponsored by a non-profit group called the World Institute for Human Development. The fee for participation is \$250.

During the weekend, which takes place in an outdoor setting, the young men talk about their feelings, test themselves physically and mentally through teamwork exercises and sports and learn from a large staff of male volunteer counselors, says Marc Schillinger, a San Rafael chiropractor who co-founded the group.

"The message is that the job of the male is to make the world safe and secure," Schillinger says. "You need to participate fully and not at the expense of others." The group's motto is "Honor what is R.I.G.H.T. -- respect, intelligence, gallantry, humor and truth."

The first step, Schillinger says, is to "let go of the boy; let go of past hurts and confusion." He gives an example: The boys gather in a circle and are told the rules -- no biting, kicking or punching. Then they're told they can let out whatever they want. "We'll ask, 'Who is first?' One guy will say, 'My mother is this' or 'My father is that' or 'My teachers are that.' Then we'll say, 'If you could get that anger out, what would you do?'"

"We take five or six men to make a container around him and say 'you're not going to hurt anyone.' They will yell, scream, push against us and go on and then fall to the ground. They are so thankful that they can get this energy out. They learn that there is a time and place to get it out. They get a better perspective."

The program follows the experience with competition and team building, Schillinger says. Throughout the weekend there's an emphasis on learning respect, often from each other.

As with the MACSA program, talk often turns to women -- and abuse, Schillinger says. "We'll ask, 'Who thinks a woman wants to be hit? Why are you hitting them? Why would you pick a battle with a weaker opponent?' Some guy will start crying and talk about his mother. The media so mis-portrays women. It's so over-whelming. They already know what's right, but they use the media as an excuse to act stupid."

At the end of the weekend, the young men go through a ceremony to signal their passage to manhood and then reunite with their families in a ritual that signifies a return to society, Schillinger says. "It's very powerful."

Pointing to alternatives

Although the event lasts just over two days, the impact can be long-lasting, participants say. "It turned my life around," says Stagnara, the Santa Rosa man who attended a Young Men's Ultimate Weekend in 2000.

The weekend gave him alternatives, he says. "I saw the men that were there were honorable, teaching us a way of life without making other people's lives miserable. I learned to be responsible, reliable and on time."

Stagnara has participated in other weekends as a volunteer, helping other young men deal with their issues.

Anger is common, he says. The weekend "teaches you that the anger that you've built up, you learn how to deal with it. You don't have to do something that's anger-driven. I didn't have to take it out on my younger sister or my mom or dad. You have a safe place to get the anger out without scaring anyone. "I'll never forget it as long as I live."

Illustration:Photo

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Mario Ozuna-Sanchez, front, is coordinator for the Male Involvement Program, which Paul Adrian Barragan-Vargas completed.