



BOYS to MEN

Group helps teens face transition to manhood with eyes and hearts open



CAROL LOLLIS

Sam Rodgers of Leverett, one of the mentors in the Journeymen group, listens to Daniel Burgos as he describes some of the ups and downs of his week. Each of the boys and men takes a turn with the "talking stick" Burgos is holding.

By **RICHIE DAVIS**
Gazette Contributing Writer

LIKE his fellow Journeymen, Noah Koester, 15, of Warwick says he looks forward to hanging out with the guys for four hours of biking, hiking, disc golf, wrestling ... and heart-to-heart talking.

The five teenagers from Franklin and Hampshire counties, meeting twice a month in downtown Greenfield with adult mentors, are part of an international program that tries to support boys during the challenges of adolescence in the absence of bonds that once were common in a more family-oriented, village-centered time.

"People always say there's a 'road of life,' but it's more like a field," said Koester, a student at Pioneer Valley Regional School in Northfield. "You choose your own path, you follow who you choose."

Last August, Koester took part in a weekend-long Rite of Passage Adventure Weekend at a camp near Brattleboro, Vt., along with four other area teens, four from southern Vermont and 20 from around the Northeast. Koester's father, David, also took part and remains one of five adult mentors for the Journeymen, or j-group meetings.

The ROPAW, as it's called, is an

initiation for teenage boys in what's part of the 12-year-old Boys to Men organization that began in California as a way to help youths through what can often be a difficult transition into adulthood. The campers are guided by adults who also volunteer to help the Journeymen, or j-groups, in the year that follows.

"We believe that today's boys have lost what boys have had in every culture throughout history: a support network of elders, fathers, uncles and other males who initiate and mentor them into young manhood," said John Berkowitz of Shelburne, a former human services worker who voluntarily coordinates the Boys to Men network in this area. Along with a high divorce rate, he says, this has led some boys to fill the void by joining gangs, abusing alcohol and drugs and engaging in violent and unhealthy behavior.

Berkowitz is working to establish another group in the Hadley/Northampton area in June, and will add a second group in the Greenfield area. Each will have seven teens and four adults, he says.

Undoing the 'code'

Boys to Men, with groups as far away as Germany and South Africa, encourages boys to trust in one an-

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CAROL LOLLIS

An objective of the Journeymen group is to encourage members to go beyond the surface and discuss their feelings. Here Dallas Broga, 16, of Turners Falls has his say.



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In addition to spending time talking with one another, the Journeymen play games and plan other activities. Here Taylor England, 13, of Leeds takes part in a game of Frisbee.

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other and open up.

The "boy code," as it's called in William Pollack's book "Real Boys," trains males to be tough and independent, to dominate others, to distrust other males and to suffer in private without ever crying, never examining or expressing feelings other than anger.

The effects can include bullying, domestic violence and suicide, say Pollack, Berkowitz and members of the j-group themselves.

"I think it leads to pent-up emotions that sort of overflow when you reach a certain age, and that can lead to all sorts of confusion," said 13-year-old Jonah Ferdman-Hayden of South Hadley, who's participating in the seven-month-old group. "Society tells all the males to just 'man up,' don't let your emotions out, just keep them in."

David Koester, 53, recalls that when he was growing up, there was a church group available to him that could have provided the kind of support the Journeymen offers, but it did not. "For me, there wasn't really an opportunity. I was getting the wrong messages: A boy was supposed to learn to handle things, mostly on their own, cowboy up and tough it out and don't pay attention to your feelings. That's the reason I really wanted to get involved in this, to change that."

Koester signed up for the ROPAW with his son and became a mentor after first trying a 24-hour men's workshop, "Reclaiming Your Teenage Fire," which also serves as a mentor training and includes j-group teens in the reverse role of mentors to their elders.

Another such workshop for men is planned for May 22, Berkowitz says. The organization, which so far has worked with more than 3,000 youths, is beneficial to the men, as well as the boys, he says. It heals some of the old wounds from their teenage years, he says, making sure boys today get support the men didn't have. Berkowitz, who has worked with adolescents at the Brattleboro Housing Authority, a Vermont-based community mental health agency and other programs, became interested after seeing a documentary film, Boys to Men, about it three years ago.

"I think most of the men who get involved with this feel that this is something we missed as teenagers," he said. "We're trying to get back and understand ourselves, to things we think teenage boys really ought to get ... being able to express what they feel in a way that isn't going to hurt somebody else."



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Opening up

All Boys to Men gatherings — ROPAW, mentor, training and biweekly j-group sessions — provide an opportunity for participants, young and old, to connect through play and heartfelt discussions.

Unlike Scouting and other youth organizations that are activity-driven, this group emphasizes sharing feelings, and unlike programs, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, it doesn't try to match a single mentor with a single teen.

Sessions begin with the boys and men playing games together in the parking lot, says Berkowitz, after which they go inside to talk. Each person takes about five minutes to say something about what's been going on in his life for the past two weeks. After the first go-round, he says, participants are encouraged to delve deeper into what they have mentioned, or to bring up other topics.

The rest of the afternoon is spent hiking, bowling, biking, swimming, canoeing, or, if the weather is bad, staying indoors and watching a video or making pizza.

The group, says Noah Koester, helps him open up.

"I feel a lot of times like I'm the only one with a problem," he said, "that no one understands. But in j-group, with all the experience of the mentors, if they've been through the same thing, they can tell you how they got through it and that can help you choose the right path."

A youth group he's part of in Warwick, he says, includes group discussions as well as similar fun activities, but the sharing isn't nearly as deep.

Coordinator John Berkowitz is currently forming another Journeymen group which will meet in the Northampton/Hadley area.

"If I say I felt very stressed this past week, someone will say, 'I'm sorry' and move on to the next one. In this group, if you say that, the mentors and others would say, 'What stressed you?' 'How did it stress you?' 'How do you think you can deal with it?' 'Do you need suggestions about how you can deal with the stuff stressing you?' Here, we're all out playing a game, if something's bothering you, you can just pull one [mentor] aside and say, 'Can I talk to you?'"

The j-group, which remains together throughout the year and ideally for three or four years through its younger members' adolescence, "teaches us how we can resolve things without having to hurt people around us or the ones we care about," said Daniel Burgos, 13, of Greenfield. "When I'm feeling sad or bad about something, it really gives me a chance to talk about that, to say how I'm feeling, so people actually listen to me," he said. "It makes it so you know you have support. Instead of just holding it in, you can say what you're feeling and then kind of let it go."

Mentors have to go through a Criminal Offender Record Information check and also go through what Berkowitz called "rigorous" screening.

Other members of the current group are teens Taylor England of Leeds and Dallas Broga of Turners Falls and mentors Len Cohen of Northampton, Bobby Dolan and Sam Rodgers of Leverett and Norm Hirschfeld of Greenfield.

Extending the reach

Berkowitz says he has a list of men and boys from Hampshire County who would like to be part of another j-group and is looking at space in Hadley or Northampton to hold meetings. He is taking applications for the next ROPAW, which will take place Aug. 13-15 in the Brattleboro area, and has been trying to get the word out through schools and the YMCA. Although the cost of the week-end and the year's program is \$450, most of the teens receive some kind of financial aid, he says, and no one's turned away because of money.

The objective is to get more males "to learn to speak your truth, to speak your feelings," said Berkowitz. "And as men we're learning that ourselves. We just want to make it so that it doesn't take so long for the men of tomorrow to get there."

(More information is available from Berkowitz at 625-6374 or at johnpberk@gmail.com, www.boystomennewengland.org and at www.boystomen.org)