

LESSONS LEARNED: IMPLEMENTING A MALE ALLY GENDER VIOLENCE TRAINING

A Report by Ed Mills, Workshop Leader and members of the
Rogers Park Young Women's Action Team



INTRODUCTION

On November 2 -3, 2007 fifteen young men gathered to participate in the Rogers Park Young Women's Action Team's (YWAT) Male Ally training. The Male Ally training was created by Ed Mills and members of the YWAT. Lillian Matanmi, a leadership team member of the YWAT, was the primary coordinator of this project.

The following report summarizes what took place and indicates some of the training's strengths and weaknesses. It also discusses the participant's – both trainees and facilitators – written and oral feedback and contains a brief appendix with some of the activities, evaluations, and facilitators' after thoughts. The YWAT hopes that this report will be of assistance to other individuals and organizations seeking to create similar trainings.

CRITICAL EXPLANATION OF CURRICULUM

The curriculum for the training was based on the need first to introduce the trainees to the problem of violence against women and girls, then second to provide them with ideas about how they can become part of the solution.

The main task for the first day was to define violence and how it is connected with ideas of manhood in this society. We eventually defined violence as personal and systematic methods of harming other people (see A1)¹ and we discussed how violence takes place in both visible and covert ways. We wanted to emphasize that socially constructed gender roles are partially informed by violence. Therefore, we opened with an activity called “Male Codes” (see A2), which helped us explore the concept of manhood, or masculinity. We broke the young men up into two groups for the activity. One group eventually defined manhood in terms of strength, perseverance, independence, and responsibility. The other group emphasized independence, responsibility, and integrity. In our discussion, the two groups explained their defining characteristics of a man and indicated that they agreed with each other. They both argued that men should be able to provide for themselves and their families and that independence is only necessary for women when men do not handle their responsibilities in this regard.

I was surprised that none of the young men were willing to attach typically “feminine” characteristics (e.g. being emotional) to their concept of masculinity. In fact, there was a tendency to base their concepts of masculinity as being in opposition to femininity. According to the participants, a man and woman do not naturally have similar qualities and should not work in a cooperative manner. There is a leader or head and there are that leader’s subordinates. Women should only occupy that position when she does not have a man around to occupy it for her. Real men did not depend on others; they were not “soft,” which I took to mean sensitive or emotional. Further, none of them seemed willing to challenge the dominant perceptions of manhood.

We followed the “Male Codes” activity with a lyrical analysis exercise, using UGK’s “International Player’s Anthem (I Choose You)” (see A3). I like to use music and lyrical analysis to explore new ideas and to emphasize themes relevant to discussion. I provide the lyrics to each song so that those participating can understand and interpret for themselves everything the artist is saying. UGK’s song helped us further explore some of the characteristics of manhood. The first verse features Andre 3000 from Outkast explaining to his friends that it is time for him to settle down and to get married. To the young men, he was handling his business as a man and becoming responsible. The next two verses are by Pimp C and Bun B of UGK. They both explain the difficulties of being pimps and how they need girls who will work hard for them. The final verse features Outkast’s Big Boi discussing “baby mama drama.” Besides discussing how masculinity is defined, I was hoping to introduce to them how vast violence is and the subtle ways we condone if not conduct it. Using derogatory terms, even “girl” (as Bun B does) “turning out” a women in order to control her – these can all be considered forms of violence. The participants disagreed with my analysis, but were curious as to why I was so critical of the song’s lyrics (even Andre’s, which seem very tame and respectful in contrast with Pimp C and Bun B).

¹ This is a summation of the various items listed as well as ways that it was actually used during discussion.

Various portions of the training depended on help from people who utilized a variety of methods to present their ideas. One group was Global Girls, Inc., a group of young women and their male allies, who created a choreopoem-type play for the training. Developed and largely written by young women and young men in middle and high school, the play included themes of mental, physical, and sexual violence as well as street harassment and conflicting notions of gender identity. Also, they made visible the terrible silence that too often accompanies the horrible things that young people face. Their performance tackled the different ways that young men and women internalize violence and explored how it becomes part of the cycle of oppression within various communities. The talented young actors took issues that the trainees, Lillian, and I were all very familiar with and dramatized them in a way that captivated everyone, yet forced us all to think about the various ways violence is manifest. In addition, the brief discussion that followed helped many of the trainees reevaluate how they conceptualized violence.

We followed the Global Girls, Inc. performance with clips from *No!: The Rape Documentary*. The video mentioned harmful forms of masculinity, it explored various types of violence although the focus was on rape, and it provided the voices of women from all different socioeconomic backgrounds and their experiences with sexual violence. No! captured everyone's attention and the Amir Sulaiman poem (A4) helped summarize some of the major themes Global Girls and No! presented. Unfortunately, the Global Girls, Inc. and No! focused solely on the Black community. As some of the young men mentioned, it would be beneficial to discuss gender violence across various communities since the problem transcends race and ethnicity.

Another important aspect of the training included getting the trainees' minds off the subject enough for us to get to know each other on a personal level. One way to achieve that is through energizers. One that I thought would be interesting is a game called "Please, Please Smile" (See A5). The guys had a hard time playing this one until they realized how hilarious it was. They thought it was awkward to go up to a guy and call him baby, to indicate love for each other, etc. But that ended up being what made it so fun. Many of them identify as being heterosexual and I really think the game gave a foundation for future conversations about sexual identity and manhood. Even though we did not discuss it in great detail, I think the game also helped them loosen their definition of masculinity because they had to do some "feminine" things – and enjoyed it. Some of them used their best pickup lines and smoothest voices when they approached each other. It also strengthened some of the personal connections within the group. Making and maintaining personal connections with people increases participation in activities that may cause some people discomfort when amongst strangers.

Stacy Erenberg from Females United For Action conducted the next workshop, which explored how the media portrays women, sexuality, and violence (A13). She first did an exercise that encouraged the participants to figure out what media is and what it has taught them about the ideal man and ideal woman. She then had the trainees pick a couple of images of their ideal masculinity and femininity from popular magazines. When they shared their ideas, we began analyzing how the media influences our opinions, and how that usually encourages the dehumanization of women and men in ways that possibly condone violence. The trainees were reluctant to agree. Most of them defended a beer ad in *King* magazine which featured a shapely Black woman in a bathing suit. She did not even have a beer in her hand, although the Budweiser

logo was prominently displayed on the page. The conversation was pretty intense and touched on a lot of different things, but in general the guys found ways to justify the ads and liked them.

Lillian compared the beer ad to one that was selling Jordans. That picture had naked women spread eagle with no shoes on, but with the logo placed prominently in the ad. One participant admitted that if he saw it, he would tell his friends about the ad and they would probably purchase the magazine just for that ad. He almost formed a brilliant critique of how the forces behind those ads target guys like him. However, he fell just short of the critique and instead argued that advertisers know what they are doing; that is how they make their money. When Lillian asked if a man would ever be shown naked in a shoe or beer ad, they all answered that they would not. Men are usually clothed. Somehow, Stacy, Lillian, and I – I mostly stayed out of the discussion except at this point – were able to drive home the point that women are sold like objects in the ads. I reminded them of the UGK song and gave them a brief second history lesson on European sponsored chattel slavery to demonstrate that *objects* are sold, not people.

After Stacy finished, the “training” for the day ended. Lillian and I planned it that way so that I could get a little time with the trainees to facilitate a Healing Circle. The purpose of the Healing Circle was two-fold: first, it would allow us to process everything we encountered that day, especially how we define violence; second, it was supposed to be space for the young men to get some help processing through the violence that they have experienced in their lives. We began with a wall of dedication focused on women we know who have been harmed by various forms of violence. From there, we shared a couple stories about some of the women then created a definition of violence based on our experiences and the things we discussed throughout the day (see A1).

Next, we discussed where violence comes from, why it remains our communities, and how it affects us as men. The participants discussed how people internalize oppression and create a cycle of violence, even though they did not use those specific terms. But they still had difficulty understanding the subtle ways we then harm women. They understood that rape is bad, and some agreed that it probably is not helpful to call women derogatory names; but they did not quite grasp how women also internalize oppression. They found it easy to blame women for getting beat up by boyfriends, etc. when women are unwilling to leave such situations. Unfortunately, at least one participant opined that very intense love motivates women to remain in abusive relationships.

Another unsettling thing that came from that session was that many of the trainees refused to believe that women who dress provocatively should not be considered “hoes.” One young man wrote in his evaluation that women who dress certain ways want to be seen that way. Ultimately, what I learned from this session, if I did not learn it prior to then, was that most of the trainees have absolutely no knowledge of how systems of oppression operate. However, even in their resistance, it was apparent to me that they were beginning to challenge their own ideas. They were reevaluating many of the things that they have been taught and opening themselves to new ideas and perspectives.

The second day of the training focused on preparing the trainees to explore themselves and how they could fight to end violence against women. We began the day with the “Act Like A Man”

(see A6) activity. Toussaint (see A13), one of that day's facilitators, and I performed a short skit in which he acted as a dad and I the ten-year-old son. After the initial skit, Toussaint asked the participants to evaluate what they saw happen. They responded by saying: I shouldn't have been playing video games when the dad came home because I knew that I was wrong; I should have known how my dad was going to respond; I should not have shown fear and should have created a better explanation than the class being too hard, etc. No one mentioned that the Toussaint was out of line for yelling at me, cutting me off before I could finish what I was saying, and for being verbally and physically violent. In order to critically examine the situation, Toussaint had the young men explain what being a man is and how stepping outside of that box may be harmful to males. They argued that when males show fear and cry they are "acting like a girl." I had them explain how one can act like a girl and then questioned why that was negative, which briefly allowed us to discuss ways that we make "other" peoples' identities negative attributes for "normal" people. For example, how does being called a girl inherently devalue girls and women? What about calling heterosexuals gay? The young men tried to justify themselves, so I explained to them how U.S. and Japanese propaganda during World War II made it easier for soldiers to kill each other and for civilians to support the war efforts. I think that helped some of them begin to question the words we use and how harmful they can be even if we do not mean them in a harmful way. Toussaint summarized the activity and brought it to a close by encouraging the young men to begin thinking about how they can change their own attitudes and behaviors so that we can put an end to violence against women and girls.

From there we jumped into the continuum of harm activity (see A7). We placed several words and phrases on a piece of white paper and discussed how seemingly harmless actions can have an incredibly negative affect on young women. It was a struggle because the participants were still unwilling to accept that their actions, including grabbing a girl's hand or referring to young women as hoes in a nonviolent manner could negatively affect them. I revised the river story in the activity manual to help them understand how negative things build up within people. I explained to them that after jumping in a river and rescuing three people I was too tired to save the hundreds that I saw. Somehow I related that to women experience violence and degradation on a regular basis and how they get tired and respond to seemingly harmless things with hostility. I had to use another example to really drive the point home. When people have been awake for too long, they become easily irritable. I asked how many of them received a phone call or interacted with their friends when they were tired and grumpy and responded to the usual jokes and interactions with anger. They could all relate. From there I brought it back to women being checked out on the street by a group of men or being hollered at. I made the point that sometimes they have experienced something traumatic and little things such as hand grabbing bring negative feelings associated with that/those experiences to their minds. It can be conscious or unconscious. Sometimes women do not even realize why they do not want men grabbing their hands. Other times they are just tired of men trying to talk to them, especially in a disrespectful way and when they want to be left alone. Lillian shared her personal experiences with guys doing things to her and how it made her feel. By the end of the activity, I think most of the participants began getting the point.

We did a comparative song analysis next. It helped us discuss positive and negative ways that we can express our sexuality on the one hand, and on the other it really drove home the points that: names, regardless of how we intend them, carry meaning (e.g. "bitch" and "hoe"); even if

rappers or the media in general do not believe that they are contributing to violence against women, they are; that we also contribute to the problem when we forgo listening to song lyrics in favor of beats and support artists such as UGK and Plies. The participants did not realize how disgusting “Shawty” (see A8) really is until we went through the song verse by verse and discussed it. The song helped them realize why using “bitch” makes it easier for men to be violent toward women. We also listened to Dead Prez, “Mind Sex” (see A9). In contrast with Plies and most songs that men make about sex, it demonstrated how artists can express their sexuality in a respectful way that allows both people involved to enjoy the experience as equals. When a man makes it a point to speak with his sexual partner, it helps him understand how to be sensitive to her needs and avoid unintentionally damaging his partner. The song, however, is not unproblematic. M-1’s final lines “once we get it started I ain’t trying to stop.” We interrogated that line and discussed a variety of meanings and possible outcomes attached with each meaning. As with the other activities, this discussion posed many challenges, but allowed the young men to really question their own ways of thinking. Doing this song analysis after the two activities about being a man and the continuum of harm helped them put a lot of their own experiences into a new perspective. It was at the conclusion of this activity that I began to notice a serious difference in how they guys were thinking about the training, themselves, and society. At least one participant expressed in the evaluation that the songs (and media analysis in general) really helped him understand how pervasive violence is.

Next, we watched *Real Talk*, a film that YWAT created. Unfortunately, several of the young men left before the film ended because we showed it during lunch.

After lunch, we played “Face Off” This game requires each participant to both make a funny face and to copy someone else’s funny face. The best copiers went to a semifinal and faced off against each other. They were T, L, K, and M. L and M battled each other in the final and tied. The activity was hilarious and got everyone, including Rudy the photographer, to really loosen up and relax.

We carried that energy into a role-playing activity in which we asked the young men to act out scenarios in which they would have to rely on the training they had received up to that point. They did this in three groups of five. The first scenario featured some young men in a rap group who were writing a song called “Put that Bitch in Her Place” or something to that effect (disgusting, I know, but all too realistic). Two people in the group disagreed with the message the song sent and the language they used because it dehumanized women. The rappers eventually discarded the song after they discussed many of the themes we covered in the media analysis sessions. It was a good skit, but I commented on the relative ease with which the “trained” swayed their friends. In a real life situation, they would meet with much more resistance. The other guys gave them similar feedback, but also pointed out the many things they did well. It was a great skit and I was proud of them.

The next group featured Toussaint (my co-facilitator) getting angry that his girlfriend would not let him “stain” her anymore.² He was contemplating beating her for not putting out after she let him have sex many times before. The other guys in the group did not appreciate his

² The trainees used an abundance of Chicago slang throughout the two-day training. Prior to the role-playing, we discussed how violent even their regional slang could be.

willingness to use physical violence against her and threatened to jump on him if he ever hit her. L took his lunch money as a warning and everyone surrounded him and yelled threats at him to try and preemptively stop him. Unfortunately, the group was taking too long, so I had to stop them before two other participants were supposed to intervene and use the things they learned at the training in order to stop Toussaint, and to intervene in the violence everyone else was willing to use against him. The skit was excellent and portrayed for us a situation that we all had witnessed or participated in before. The trainees argued that violence cannot end violence.

The final group included “Lillian” and “Ed” coming from the Male Ally training. They encounter three young men who are hollering at and grabbing at a young lady. “Lillian” and “Ed” explained to them how inappropriate their behavior was and began to educate them about the larger problems they are reinforcing. Watching the skits made me feel good because I could tell that even if the trainees did not quite buy everything presented, they were definitely wrestling with the ideas and trying to figure them out on their own terms. It was at this point that I asked them to take five minute (way too short, I told them) to write a reflection (details below).

We viewed L’s documentary on “female discrimination” before finally getting into our last session conducted by E Nina Jay. She began by expressing a couple of her observations about the trainees, then presented her ideas about how we could make sure she worked in comfort. First, she demanded safe space because she was about to show us the pain she carries around all them time, which makes her uncomfortable. There was no telling what young men who laugh when their peers call a “stuck up” girl a bitch will do with her once they gain access to her vulnerability. With that one comment, Nina summed up what I had been trying to get across to the young men since Friday morning – men have power over women that is built into the social and political system. Finally, Nina’s poetry and paintings put a very *personal* face on the Global Girls, Inc. skits, the *No!* documentary, and all of the women who get degraded in popular culture. Through her graphic descriptions of her experiences, she forced us all to travel with her into some of the most painful places that men force women into. For the most part, Nina did not say anything that we had not heard. She did not cover any ground we had not gotten to or give us any new information. What Nina did was force all of us to reckon with the violence we have committed or condoned in the presence of a person who we have harmed. It was difficult for me to take in. By the time Nina finished, I was speechless, ashamed, determined, and just plain overwhelmed. I could not say too much – no one really spoke at all – so we just thanked her and ended the training. We provided all trainees with several resources at the end of the training. These included a copy of YWAT’s documentary, Real Talk, a CD by Common, and a comprehensive resource guide that included key statistics, articles, phone numbers for anti-violence organizations, and a set of activities from YWAT’s discussion guide.

EVALUATIONS SUMMARY

Day One

BRIEF EVALUATION (see A10): This evaluation was short and simple. Overall, they got a lot out of the first day of training. Some of them indicated that they gained a better sense of what

violence is and that it can be as subtle as grabbing a young lady's hand. Out of the fourteen young men who participated that day, only four indicated that there were elements they did not like. One did not "like how we didn't have a women's opinion." Another was displeased with the "Lack of movement (physical movement," the "heterosexism," and the "definition of a man." The other two included complaints about eating too much food and about some people's comments and questions. Most of the evaluations indicated that wanted more interactive learning with movement and more trainings of this type.

Day Two

5 MINUTE WRITTEN REFLECTIONS (See A11): The written reflections pretty much mirror the evaluations. Most of the guys shared how appreciative they were up to that point, how they must rethink their thoughts and learned behaviors, etc. [enter E Nina Jay] I asked them how effective the training would be for young men who, unlike them, didn't already think that violence against women is a problem. Most, if not all of them, felt that it would benefit all men should participate and would benefit from the experience. D and a couple others expressed how disappointed they were at the short length of the training and M asked if there was any way to remain involved. Lillian explained antiviolenace training to them and I discussed the MAN/YMAT (according to one of the participants), along with the YWAT conference in February and the University of Illinois conference in April. They all became excited at the thought of creating a regular group and asked how soon we could begin meeting. In their evaluations, all but one stated that they would like to begin educating younger males about these issues. Even the one who said no indicated that he would first want more education and training himself. All in all, at that point in the day, I think CJ's reflection summed up what most, if not all of us, were feeling: "This program will go on as long as I live..."

FINAL EVALUATIONS (see A12): These evaluations reinforced what has already been written. However, I think that it is important here to highlight a few items. First, out of the fifteen young men who participated that day, thirteen indicated that they would like to conduct a male allies training at their schools or in their neighborhoods, especially for elementary and middle school youth. One young man who said no, only did so because he would "rather gain much more info before I began [sic] to teach others." The other stated that he was not yet sure, probably for the same reasons. Such comments reinforce what the young men stated during the training; we need to continue educating these and other young men about gender violence so that they will be more confident and comfortable working to eliminate it.

Next, a few people indicated that they wanted more of a female perspective. Almost everything we did on day one included the voices and perspectives of women and girls. On day two, we focused more on what the young men could do. However, based on the verbal comments I received from the young men, I interpret the female perspective to mean they wanted more young women to participate. During the "Healing Circle" session, the young men asked if Lillian could return and three of them indicated on their evaluations that E Nina Jay was the most powerful part of the training. Two indicated that they got the most from Global Girls, Inc. And one stated that the poetry had the most impact. I am not sure whether he meant E Nina Jay's or the song lyric analysis. I am leaning toward the former. Based on these items, it may be worth discussing the

inclusion of more of the young women from YWAT during certain portions of the training. It may be beneficial to include them in part of the Healing Circle.

Finally, one evaluation indicated the dissatisfaction with focusing mainly on violence in Black communities. I agree that we focused too much on African Americans. Although the majority of the trainees were Black, it would still be helpful to discuss the problem with examples from various ethnic communities. Besides focusing the problem too narrowly on a particular group of people, I think that being broader will allow us to discuss more adequately the systems of oppression are interconnected.