

MEN WHO LIKE WOMEN

by Jackie Knowles

Big boys don't cry. Big boys are strong. Big boys bring home big bucks. Big boys also suffer a higher rate of ulcers and heart attacks, not to mention incidence of violence and sexual abuse.

The National Organization for Changing Men, a group of men from various walks of life and with a median age of about forty, has decided to liberate men from the traps of big-boy stereotypes.

The women's movement woke them up to the idea that men, like women, don't have to

be stuck in prescribed roles. They began taking a closer look at what it means to be a man and how traditional men's sexual training can cripple them emotionally and trigger violence toward others.

"When political leaders continue to play the power and war games of boyhood, it's time for a change," says the National Organization for Changing Men in its brochure.

Founded five years ago, the organization grew out of annual Men and Masculinity conferences, which originated from a women's study program at the University of Tennessee eleven years ago. The twelfth Men and Masculinity conference was held last month in Hartford, Connecticut.

Unlike men's rights groups that sprang up as a backlash of the women's movement, the organization is pro-feminist and stands behind women who are working to stop rape, battery, pornography, harassment and discrimination.

One of the organization's early projects was to establish BrotherPeace — a group of men working to end men's violence. It sponsors an internationally coordinated day of action each year. In 1985, groups of men around the world shared the same three minutes of silence on October 18. "In three minutes across the United States six women will be raped, ten women will be battered, forty-six thousand dollars will be spent on pornography — by men," reads the BrotherPeace literature.

As part of the BrotherPeace day, organization members in New York, for example, also held symbolic vigils to protest the Catholic church's opposition to women priests and homosexuals, the funding of Contras, the pornography in movies and the oppression of workers in the garment district.

Another focus of the group is to work to end discrimination based on sexual orientation.

"We are a critical laboratory where heterosexual and gay men learn about themselves and each other in a cooperative environment," said Jeff Beane, a co-chairman of the organization.

Beane, who is thirty-nine, considers psychology and the men's movement essential to his personal growth and "wholeness." A Gestalt psychotherapist who has a practice in Los Angeles and lives in West Hollywood, Beane is the only organization council member to have attended all twelve conferences on Men and Masculinity.

Mark Stevens, in his early thirties, is the other co-chairman of the organization. Married and the father of two children, he is coordinator of training at the University of Southern California student counseling center.

The two men showed a marked respect for each other as they conducted a recent council meeting side by side, with Stevens acting as the principal spokesman.



ILMARI VAANANEN, "SELF-PORTRAIT"

The words "loving" and "cooperative" came up frequently in the discussions among council members as they made clear efforts to avoid power plays.

A key item on the agenda was to map out a five year campaign to wipe out "homophobia," which the organization defines as fear of homosexuality or being perceived as homosexual and fear of getting close to a member of the same sex. Their goal is that questions of sexual orientation, like color, will not arise.

Harry Brod, a council member and assistant professor of philosophy and the Study of Women and Men in Society at USC in Los Angeles, said homophobia has a direct effect on the civil rights of homosexuals.

Bill Vlahos, a member of the board of the Los Angeles chapter, said, "Being down and asking for help is foreign to men. They have to be good enough to be with their friends. When they need support, they withdraw."

Vlahos found that a willingness to be vulnerable freed him to establish better relations with women.

"Women say one thing and act in another," he said. "They say they want men to express their feelings, to be gentle, but they pick macho men who sweep them off their feet as lovers. Then they complain, 'I picked another man who can't express his feelings.'"

Vlaho's girlfriend, who is a clinical psychologist, also is a member of the organization. "I was amazed after the first meeting at the level and depth of feeling communicated among the men," she said. "This is what women are supposed to do and men are doing it better."

To date, the organization has only two chapters — in Los Angeles (P.O. Box 24260, Los Angeles, California 90024) and Ohio (P.O. Box 10161, Columbus, Ohio 43201) — with another in Washington, D.C., awaiting council approval. The organization, however, plugs into other men's groups across the country.

National dues are twenty-five dollars a year, local dues are an additional fifteen dollars. Further information is available by calling (213) 396-3655 or writing the national office at P.O. Box 451, Watseka, Illinois 60970.

Jackie Knowles wrote this article for the Knight-Ridder News Service.

LETTERS

50 YEARS AGO

TO THE EDITOR:

I read with interest your reflections in the Times Eagle of your experience in Viet Nam.

Some four thousand, five hundred of us Americans were members of the International Brigade which fought alongside the armed forces of the Spanish Republic back in 1937-39. We were trying to save the Republic from the fascist hordes led by Franco, backed and armed by the fascists of Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Nazi Germany.

Hitler and Mussolini kept the fascist forces so that they often had four times the arms the forces of the Republic had. The liberals of the United States government and the governments of England and France looked the other way and allowed Hitler and Mussolini to destroy the people's Republic — then Hitler and Mussolini went on to the horror of World War II.

I was a member of the light machine gun squad which was "out there" bearing the brunt of attack from the heavily armed fascist forces. Somehow I survived until the last, but I was so emaciated from steady near-starvation on a few chickpeas or lentils that I fell victim to diphtheria a few days after my final removal from action.

If the "democratic" countries had helped us, Mussolini and Hitler could have been stopped in their drive for world conquest — stopped there in Spain.

Likewise, the bigbellied bullyboys who crave conquest and destruction of people's governments in Central America and around the world, can be stopped in their drive for conquest and destruction. But not if liberals in power serve to play the game of the war-mongering bullyboys.

— JAMES M. JONES, OTTER ROCK

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