



The rite way

THERE IS A WAY TO HELP YOUR STUDENTS DEVELOP INTO HEALTHY YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN – BY CREATING MEANINGFUL RITES OF PASSAGE BEYOND MERELY GETTING A DRIVER'S LICENCE. ANDREW LINES AND GRAHAM GALLASCH EXPLAIN.

THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF BOYS, as well as girls, are matters rarely off the educational agenda, and substantial thought and resources have been devoted to them over the years, yet we still appear to be failing to meet the needs of our children, particularly boys, in our current education system. More than that, we appear to be failing at a time when the burden of responsibility for the emotional and social education of our children is shifting from the family to the school. Worse still for our boys, we in western society have lost some of the most significant emotional and social educational tools – initiation and rites of passage.

As Franciscan priest and spiritual writer, Richard Rohr, put it in 'Boys to men: rediscovering rites of passage for our time,' 'It seems that it is only the recent West that has deemed it unnecessary to "initiate" young men. Otherwise, culture after culture felt that if the young man were not introduced to "the mysteries," he would not know what to do with his pain and would almost always abuse his power. It looks like they were right.'

Coming at rites of passage from a sociological rather than a spiritual perspective, Lisa Graham McMinn, an associate professor of sociology at George Fox University in Oregon, has observed that obtaining a driver's licence is about the only surviving rite of passage we all undertake. 'Modern societies tend to grant privileges according to years lived rather than rites of passage per se – ritual ceremonies that determine one is responsible, tied into a larger community, and ready for the rights and responsibilities of adulthood,' Graham McMinn points out in *Sexuality and Holy Longing: Embracing intimacy in a broken world*. 'With the exception of obtaining a driver's licence, the rights, privileges and responsibilities of adulthood are usually achieved by reaching certain birthdays rather than by successfully making one's way through a series of training, preparing and testing rituals.'

Rites of passage are, however, slowly re-emerging in the West as a vehicle for helping develop healthy young men and women. At present there are a number of exciting ini-

tiatives in Australia which provide rites of passage for boys, but involvement in such programs often relies upon a significant adult male in their lives initiating the participation.

Experience as secondary school teachers has taught us that there are a large number of boys without a significant adult male to call them on such a journey, but also that within the school context and with the support of caring male teachers such an essential experience can be brought to the boys of our nation.

It's the role of men to act as guides for boys searching for what it means to be a man, the best man they can become. That understanding led to the creation of what we called the Rite Journey.

The Rite Journey framework

One of the most important and indeed unique aspects of the Rite Journey is the significance placed on ceremony and celebration throughout the year as boys undertake the transition to men. The experience of



boys is deeply enriched by offering symbol-rich ceremonies to celebrate their journey.

In order to provide a relevant and meaningful rite of passage we read widely. We also sought advice from Indigenous elders who lamented the dissolving of the initiation processes in their own culture. Their advice was to avoid borrowing elements from other traditions and to create a rite of passage program that came from our own hearts. After much further reading and discussion we decided to base our program on the seven steps of the hero's journey: the call; the threshold or departure; the following, involving mentors and guides; the challenges; the abyss, involving getting lost; the return; and the homecoming.

These seven stages frame the ceremonies and celebrations that occur throughout the year. Each ceremony or celebration acknowledges the passage, the emphasis being to honour the process and the boys' experiences as they undertake that passage.

Some ceremonies are held at school, while others occur at specially-chosen local land-

marks which are meaningful to the students and represent some form of connection with things beyond school.

The Rite Journey content

In determining how a program would look we sought to understand the historical and contemporary contexts of rites of passage, but also considered how different series of training, preparing and testing rituals might set boys on the path to a responsible and respectful adulthood.

Richard Fletcher, the first manager of the Boys To Fine Men Program of the Family Action Centre at the University of Newcastle, suggests that schools need to develop a more holistic approach to boys' education. According to Fletcher, writing in 'The wellbeing of boys,' this education should occur 'through changes to the curriculum and school structure – by addressing key health issues for boys such as risk taking, social disengagement, poor nutrition and homophobia.'

Over the past four years we've created a structure to do exactly that. Working in co-

educational schools, we recommend that students be divided into single-sex classes for a number of lessons in Year 9, which is when the Rite Journey is delivered by same-gender teacher-guides. We've also managed structural changes that have allowed the same-gender teacher and class to be together for up to 10 lessons a week, in subjects including Health and Physical Education, and English. This creates opportunities for teachers to explore issues that arise in a variety of learning situations using a variety of different media.

Some of the topics covered in the curriculum of the program are: personal biography; gender identity and construction; feelings and beliefs; love, relationships and sexuality; anger, bullying, depression and violence; risk taking; stillness, meditation and relaxation; communication; and mentoring. These topics are explored in a variety of activities including a solo experience, adventure camps, world drumming, rock and water, journal writing, mentoring, major projects, talking sticks and juggling. Each of these activities work together to create a whole-year journey

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in which boys are able to uncover some of the mysteries of adulthood.

Connectedness and mentoring

Numerous studies into teenage health and wellbeing over the past decade have attempted to identify key protective factors, and found one of the most significant factors is connectedness. Michael Resnick from the Adolescent Health Program at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, for example, conducted a study of 12,000 adolescents from 80 high schools across the United States that found that 'young people who have a feeling of connectedness with parents, family and school have lower levels of smoking, drinking, other drug use, suicidal thinking, risky sexual behaviour and exposure to violence.'

Given the importance of connectedness we've built strong connection points between the students, teacher, parents or care-givers, other mentors and peers into the program.

A mentoring program brings together individual students and same-gender adult mentors, each of whom support and guide their student in an area of interest outside of school time. Selected by the family, the mentor and student meet for 18 hours during the year to work on a project where the ostensible focus is on learning and refining a skill with the hope that this practical interaction will enable the development of a deeper emotional relationship between the two. The student records his experiences in a journal and, at the end of the year, is required to present the fruits of the time spent with his mentor.

Opportunities are also provided for strengthening the bond between the boys and their fathers or male caregivers. Breakfasts, overnight camps and special ceremonies are used to assist in this process.

The boys themselves are also encouraged to be mentors. Year 9s learn about how young children learn to read and are given the skills to assist learner readers with their reading. They're then buddied with a junior student whom they meet once a week. This mentoring activity draws upon the maturity of Year 9 boys.

Students say the Rite Journey helps them by 'unlocking a piece of myself,' 'by teaching us important stuff but also making it fun.' Students describe it as life changing.

The Rite Journey was developed as a response to a clear need for boys, but it's clear that not all girls have a suitable introduction into womanhood either. This, coupled with the demand for providing a partner program for girls, led to the creation of the Rite Journey for girls. The celebrations and ceremonies can be identical to those for boys, but some are quite different. Similarly, some of the program content is relevant although other aspects are not.

Just as the needs of boys and girls may differ, the diversity of schools and students in them mean that any program is likely to differ from one school to another. The good news is that the curriculum in all states and territories enables you to adapt programs to suit individual schools, which means there's plenty you can do to for the health and wellbeing of boys and girls in your school beside watching them get a driver's licence. **T**

Andrew Lines is a specialist teacher in the Steiner education system. He has a background in Health and Physical Education and Outdoor Education.

Graham Gallasch is a Christian Living key learning area leader at a co-educational Lutheran secondary school in the Adelaide Hills. He has a background in Health and Physical Education.

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LINKS: For further information and contact details visit www.theritejourney.com

Family and Community Strengths Conference

The University of Newcastle, April 2008



Get inspired, energised and informed at the Family and Community Strengths Conference, a forum for the community, health workers, teachers, academics and policy makers. This year's themes embrace the multitude of ways in which people engage in their communities, through the arts, spirituality, social enterprise and the innovative and creative means by which we work to develop a sense of connection, belonging and meaning.

The fifth biennial Family and Community Strengths Conference's theme is "Community Engagement: A Rewarding Business". A host of international and Australian keynote speakers and panel presentations complement a variety of practical and focused workshops. Participants of Keweenaw College, Durwin, New Zealand will describe his work in developing school cultures that continually review their progress, seek the best outcomes and address the challenges needed for implementing change in a school's organisation and structure.

Professor Terry Lovat is the Pro Vice-Chancellor of the Faculty of Education and Arts at the University of Newcastle. He is chief investigator on the Australian Government's Values Education: Good Practice Schools Project and has worked extensively with Australian Schools in the implementation of values education. He has also been a consultant on values education in many sites, including China, Africa and Russia. The focus of his presentation will be on the links between values education, service learning and quality pedagogy.

An exciting development is the first National Indigenous Family and Community Strengths Conference, which will overlap the first day of the main conference. Under the theme "Our Culture: A Strength to Build On", the conference is co-convened by the University of Newcastle's Family Action Centre and the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child

Care Incorporated. It will allow indigenous communities to share their stories, experiences, cultural strengths and community and family engagement.

Keynote speaker Chris Sarra is Director of The Institute for Indigenous Leadership in Education and Development based at Cherbourg in Queensland. In his time as Principal of Cherbourg State School Chris has initiated changes that saw dramatically improved school attendance and increased community involvement in education. Under his leadership the school became nationally acclaimed for its pursuit of the "Strong and Smart" philosophy.

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W www.pco.com.au/family

Paul Ferris
Keweenaw College



Terry Lovat
Pro Vice-Chancellor
Faculty of Education
and Arts



Chris Sarra
Director of the Institute
for Indigenous
Leadership in Education
and Development



For media & marketing enquiries contact:

Camilla McQuarrie
Publications & Marketing
Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle
P (02) 4921 3743
F (02) 4921 3086
E Camilla.Mcquarrie@newcastle.edu.au
W www.newcastle.edu.au/centre/fac

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