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boys will be

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Boys will be. Who they are. Whole. Human. Smart. Strong. Kind. Whoever they are, regardless of what society says being a man is or looks like.

Community Practicum Final Report: [boyswillbe](#)
An (ongoing) engagement project by Tori Hoffman

Introduction & Background

The name of my project comes from a very well-known phrase: boys will be boys. Michael Kimmel, an American sociologist and leading researcher and writer on men and masculinity, in 2012 asked, “Why don’t we say ‘boys will be boys’ when a man wins the Nobel Peace Prize?” And he asks a fair question. The phrase “boys will be boys” is often used to excuse problematic behavior rather than to celebrate the successes of men and boys. Boys need to see examples of what healthy, respectful manhood looks like and they have told me that when they share their experiences they feel more confident addressing unhealthy behaviors of their peers and problematic relationships or habits in their own life. They want to learn from each other. My project, Boys will be, reframes that famous phrase to be more open-minded and to signal less rigid definitions of manhood for a future generation of boys. I led group discussions and surveyed over 20 boys on how they communicate with other boys and men and what signals they pick up after working with them consistently for a full year.

Talking to men about the ways rigid gender roles could be affecting their mental health and the way they behave towards women feels more urgent than ever before. Building on what I learned from my certification to lead discussions with boys and men on the topic of healthy, respectful manhood, my practicum serves young men of color in Brooklyn between the ages of 12 and 28. I produced a video series based on three group discussions that I hosted this semester with the goal of educating and empowering young men to see themselves as powerful agents of change in their community. In each group discussion I asked questions like, “What is hard about being a man?” and “How can we promote less rigid expressions of masculinity and learn to accept that there are multiple ways to be, appear and succeed as a man?”

With my practicum, I have started and will continue a conversation about how boys are taught to act and feel (or not feel) and why. I built a sense of community among the boys and young men who participated and engaged in conversation with me and one another, and I hope they can lead the charge in changing the narrative around what it means to be a man and how healthy manhood is lived out. In the summer of 2019, I got to attend and cover a training in Long Beach, California for leaders around ending domestic violence and promoting healthy, respectful manhood. I gained contacts at [A CALL TO MEN](#) and the [Alliance for Boys and Men of Color](#) at PolicyLink, the organization where I interned. As soon as I got back to New York, I looked up A CALL TO MEN’s [LIVERESPECT curriculum](#), took their online training and earned a certification to lead group discussions with men and boys on the topic of healthy manhood and coaching on how to be a respectful person. Rather than responding to violence after it happens or treating negative health outcomes long after they developed, if at all, those at A CALL TO

MEN want to go upstream and prevent these ills from happening in the first place. They and I both operate with the assumption that real change starts with engaging boys and young men directly. I wrote a [story about this event](#), and for more about my summer internship see [this Medium post](#).

As I said in my final presentation on December 10, 2019, I am proud to call myself a social journalist. I am 24 years old and I have been doing journalism for years. At age 18, I was the editor of my high school yearbook at Arapahoe High School in Centennial, CO. I served as the editor at the same time that one of my classmates entered the building with a shotgun killing one student before killing himself and that brought more editorial and professional decisions than I could have ever imagined. My staff and I won [a national award](#) for our coverage of the shooting, the community response and school pride during the 50th anniversary of our school as it was a staple in the local community. I then went on to be the editor of the independent student newspaper at Seattle Pacific University; the small, private, Christian, liberal arts university I attend directly before coming to this program (two months prior to be exact).

Despite my relationship to gun violence, I have not felt compelled to report on gun violence (or to relive trauma even though I have been hyper-aware of every shooting that has happened since) as much as I felt a call to report on the root causes of it – in addition to the root causes of “toxic masculinity.” I grew more interested in the environment that allows for violence, hatred and misogyny to take place in the first place and how boys and men are socialized. So, I decided to explore a very complex issue: the identity of a man. I wanted to know what it really means to perform masculinity and more about this whole toxic masculinity thing: where it came from, how it is perpetuated and how the use of such language affects the lives of real people. And it turned out, I was not the only one thinking critically about issues related to this community. Earlier this year, the American Psychological Association sounded the alarm when they created the [first-ever](#) explicit [Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Men and Boys](#). While there had been previous guidelines for practice with women and girls, transgender people and gender nonconforming people, older adults and even guidelines for certain issue areas, but not for boys and men because for decades, psychology treated men (particularly white men) as the standard for psychological development and treatment.

[According to](#) the American Psychological Association, men commit 90 percent of homicides in the United States and represent 77 percent of homicide victims. They're the demographic group most at risk of being victimized by violent crime. They are 3.5 times more likely than women to die by suicide, and their life expectancy is 4.9 years shorter than women's. The odds of engaging in violence, being depressed and receiving harsher punishments in school are worse for black boys and men. Even though I saw the APA guidelines as a need to re-examine the messages we are sending boys and men about their identity, I needed to talk to boys and men to see how their experience compared to broad-based data and trending behaviors. Given the alarming state of men's health, now is the time to interrogate the gender identity. I see, in this moment in time, a huge call to engage them on the issue of living healthy lives, respecting women and girls and feeling free to be full, complete humans. The release of

these guidelines signals a change in narrative in the way that psychologists are talking about and with boys and men, and there is more room for change in how we as journalists talk about them as well. While media has traditionally underrepresented black and brown men, they have also tended to depict them as criminals or failures. There have also been [countless examples of fathers being praised](#) for doing work that is expected of mothers. [A positive example of black men in media](#), this Forbes article highlights an initiative to increase the number of black men in medical school.

What I Did

For my practicum, I created a video series that showcases the group discussions had by different groups broken into three different age brackets: 12-14, 15-19 and 20-28. I have those videos featured on [my website](#) and on YouTube by January 15. In addition, I have provided links to resources related to mentorship, practicing art, youth development and discussing healthy expressions of masculinity and I have also done engagement on social media through call outs, crowdsourcing and promoting social content both photo and video. One thing that came up in multiple group discussions was that a truly masculine man is forever working on himself and it is fine to be emotional. In their individual survey answers, many of them said they left the conversation feeling that they should open up to someone close to them about their feelings more often – and that doing so could better their well being.

In the first semester of this program, when looking for spaces to learn more about the needs of my community and its stakeholders, I set up Google alerts related to this community and created a Twitter list of people talking about manhood and healthy masculinity to watch, and I read [For the Love of Men: A New Vision for Mindful Masculinity](#) by Liz Plank and [Survival Math](#) by Mitchell Jackson to boost my knowledge and vocabulary around this issue (and I highly recommend these books). Liz Plank went around the country interviewing men for her book and she avoided using the phrase “toxic masculinity,” which I also took to doing. When Plank asked men what was hard about being a man, the most common answer she got was other men. Most of the men Plank spoke to had never talked about these problems with other men in their lives. “That’s not to say women don’t reinforce these patriarchal notions of masculinity and have absorbed them as well,” she wrote. Throughout the book she articulated how intersectional this issue of masculinity is, and promoted something called a “gender reset for boys,” in which we teach them how to create healthy emotional habits and to be aware of one’s internal dialogue and behavior. She coined the term “mindful masculinity.” Next on the reading list is [The Little #MeToo Book for Men](#) by Mr. Mark Greene, which has been called “nothing short of a blueprint for men’s liberation,” by the Caroline Heldman, executive director at The Representation Project. Additionally, I will read [She Said](#), by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, the Pulitzer Prize-winning reporters who broke the news of Harvey Weinstein’s sexual harassment and abuse for the New York Times. I cannot wait to read the untold story of their investigation and its consequences for the #MeToo movement.

Also in the first semester, with the help of my lovely classmate Danny Laplaza, I conducted a social experiment in Bryant Park. With the holiday market in full swing, we invited passersby to write a word or phrase that comes to mind when defining what it means to be a man. We also conducted video interviews of those willing to share more about their definition of being a man. I compiled those responses into [a short video](#) that is featured on my website. From that experiment, I learned that when discussing manhood, men either described an idealized, stereotypical man or didn't know how to answer the question. One man said the most important quality of being a man was taking responsibility for his actions and "doing the right thing," and I could almost hear him carry the weight of his own world on his shoulders as he answered. I had great conversations, but I left wanting more time with more than one person to see how strangers could relate or learn from each other when they shared their experiences.

I went searching for online spaces in which boys and men were convening on their own around healthy masculinity, but what I found were toxic spaces where men were convening on platforms like 4Chan, Reddit and Twitch where users can use strong, hurtful language while remaining anonymous. When posting on subreddits, other closed groups and DMs, I found that people seek like-minded people to communicate with, and one user told me he felt good sharing with others in the group because he might be able to help them. When I asked if he would be interested in doing so in person, he said maybe. So I started thinking that I wanted to get people together to share their experiences and then share that discussion online for even more people to relate to, learn from or be influenced in some other way by it. I realized from my initial research that having an informed discussion about how men are socialized is serving a huge need in the community of boys and men of color in itself. By engaging a group of men, and then sharing the content of our convo, I will be able to reach a lot of men and encourage conversation and accountability among them. Even though I didn't find any groups where men, especially young men, were self-gathering around this specific issue, I did find groups and organizations working to support boys and men and at least starting to [have these conversations](#). Make It Happen, for example, serves young men of color between the ages of 16 and 24 who have been negatively impacted by community violence. More on them later.

Wanting to serve a community that has historically been underserved by mainstream media, I went to East New York as it is largely a community of color in a low-income area and looked for community centers and other programs where boys and men met already. That is when I found P.S. 292, specifically the after school program put on by Good Shepherd Services. I first connected with the director and assistant director there and showed up consistently without a pen and paper, without an agenda, to get to know the boys in the program. I later connected with the high school students in the same building as the middle school I had developed a relationship with. I invited some of the youth development coordinators for the after school program to come to a group discussion with the 20-28-year-old group, and I did another social experiment type thing in Downtown Brooklyn where I recruited some of the 20-24-year-old men for my group discussion.

The topics of discussion include how men are socialized, when young men realize they

are a man, what they are taught about what it means to be a man, how men relate to women, what is hard about being a man, how we see manhood evolving, what we all can do to promote less rigid gender roles and anywhere else the discussion goes organically. Through conversation both in-person and online, my community and I will help promote a version of masculinity that is less rigid and more inclusive of everyone who intersects with it. Each discussion had 5 to 8 participants so everyone had the opportunity to speak and to be heard with me as the facilitator. In doing that I learned just how important it is to listen empathetically and to be willing to share as much as you ask others to share. I also found that the early connections and the care and consistency that I demonstrated translated into trust that I built over time that made it possible for me to have the group discussions that I had to produce the video series and other photo and written content I produced at all. In partnership with the community members – boys and men who are not usually given time and space and a voice in the media landscape – I noticed a gap that exists and so I created a service and a way to keep engaging boys and keeping them accountable to each other.

Metrics & Outcomes

One metric that signals that success is the way that they are getting together and gathering even without me or any prompting from me, and also exhibited in the group discussion I am hosting this week even after graduation because members of my community have asked for it. Also after participating in a group discussion, some boys said they felt motivated to call out inappropriate behavior by other boys and that should open up about their feelings more. I am proud of the way that I was able to connect with them and I am excited for the ways that our relationships will grow and help the lives of real people and affect real change in society.

To find out how they felt, beyond what they shared in the group discussions. I gave the participants a handwritten survey on paper prior to and after each of the group discussions to track how these specific spaces, times and topics that were discussed influenced their ideas of how they should act and how they could use what they learned in their daily lives. From those, Navi Singh said, “I would definitely participate again because there has to be a place for discussions like these.” A few in the high school and older group shared that they would like to discuss sex and relationships more in future discussions. Overall, they were all grateful for the space for discussion. I also had permission forms for the parents of the minor participants to sign to approve their participation in these discussions as well as the rights for me to publish on YouTube, my website and social media. I tried to exercise ethical journalism while pushing boundaries to practice community engagement and radical listening.

Impact & Next Steps

Based on the work I have done, I see a need for change in the way that journalists portray boys and men in their work, as well as how they collaborate with them and create opportunities for them in the process of their work. After doing research and getting certified to lead discussions, I still asked for feedback on what to talk about in the group discussions and let

them happen organically. In the future, I will continue to use Instagram and Twitter to engage my community by asking what they would like me to report on and what information I can provide for them to make it easier to be who they are and to live in their community. I know that my community is active on Instagram and Twitter, so I knew I had to use those platforms. I use Twitter to report and promote work from anyone discussing masculinity – celebrities, leaders of nonprofit organizations, community organizers, politicians and other media outlets or special edition entertainment projects on this topic (it has all happened!). As the more visual platform, I use Instagram to promote the video series on my website and YouTube and to introduce the young men who participated in discussions with me. I also used and will use the story feature to publish polls asking questions like “What is hard about being a man?” periodically, and other more time sensitive questions, say about the [New Masculinity Issue of GQ](#). I will also promote articles and other resources that promote healthy expressions of manhood too to shout out those who also get the importance of this discussion – cause that’s building community! By consistently engaging my community on what they want to see next and remaining transparent about what I am working on I will continue to gain trust. Participants of mine regularly engage with boyswillbe on Instagram and Twitter and have shared or reposted what I have posted on their own accounts.

Reflection

By practicing social journalism and engaging the community, there is a sense of ownership in the work and the media being put out which points to the power dynamic between young men of color and a journalist that is shifting on a fundamental level through my project.

By asking for feedback on my practicum idea as I moved through it, something I attribute to design-thinking methods, I was challenged to be more inclusive in my approach. They suggested that include everyone who is at the intersection of manhood and masculinity and I am proud to say that the group discussion with 20-28-year-old men featured three cis-gender men and two trans, non-binary men. One of the cis-gender men who participated in the group discussion said he would definitely participate in a group discussion like that again because there has to be a place for discussions like these. I was extremely affirmed by that. Another cis-gender man said he learned more than he expected to and one trans man was shocked by how many struggles and experiences he shared with cis-gender men. He even suggested that I sell my idea so that there could be a consistent, community-based version of these group discussions that brought trans men into more spaces about masculinity. He envisions a world in which trans men share space with cis-gender men, and any men who do fit into the gender binary on the masculine side without any hostility or judgment. That is what the project hopes to accomplish as well. And that is why my impact is visible in my relationships which are more deep than they are wide.

By discussing mindful masculinity with boys and men, they have told me that this adds value to the community because they are not usually given the space or authority to have these conversations. The extra step needed for boys to address their relationship to masculinity was

meeting in person regularly and talking and leading by example. I encouraged people to follow me on social media and to use the hashtag #boyswillbe to either celebrate the boys and men in their life, to call out or expose traditional, old school ways that are harmful to men and others in their life or to talk about new ways to promote or discuss healthy masculinity – it is meant for as a starter for a wide range of discussions. In this highly politicized society, the term “toxic masculinity” to some is just a liberal scheme to emasculate and blame men. Our cultural concept of manliness glorifies stoicism, strength, virility, and dominance, and we know that it can be harmful to mental health thanks to the American Psychological Association.

Joel Heredia is one of the middle schoolers that I met when I started showing up to the after school program at PS 292 in East New York on a regular basis. I was there to get to know everyone there, but especially the boys. I observed their interactions before I started asking questions. After getting to know Joel on my own, he shared with me struggles to imagine what career he wants to have when he gets older. He spent time in a juvenile detention center at age 10, and has jumped or been jumped by more people than he can count. He told me, “If I go to jail, I go to jail.” Joel is 13 years old. When we were in our group discussion he still exposed ideas that suggested he need to take care of things even if that meant getting physical. He talked about pressures that he thinks are specific to men due to the expectation that they should have it all taken care of and to remain “macho,” in his words. Earlier this semester I [wrote about my findings](#) on this and published it on Medium.

For this reason, I have provided resources on [my website](#) (scroll down to the bottom) as space for them to see positive news about boys and stories that celebrate their successes so that they might be encouraged to envision more for themselves. I too, still want to develop a curriculum or how-to guide for folks to lead a discussion like this in their community, that can be found on my website. I am also thinking about doing a zine that shares and celebrates the stories of boys and men since I found that the parents of middle schoolers largely receive things via handout, physical paper forms and not online or digitally in any way.

In the future I will partner and guide my community to check out [Make It Happen](#) in Crown Heights (and also Bed-Stuy I think). Their staff serve young men of color between the ages of 16 and 24 who have been negatively impacted by community violence. MIH is a trauma-informed, culturally responsive program that provides mentorship, intensive case management and clinical interventions to young men who have been overexposed to violence. They support their participants by helping them recognize their trauma and engage in healing. In doing so, they challenge their participants to think about how their definition of manhood is intertwined with trauma and gender roles. This framework has a connection to [restorative narrative](#) as a practice of trauma-informed storytelling. As also mentioned in my presentation, I have a meeting arranged with Keith Miller, the Director of Youth Programs for Deep Center, a community-based organization in Savannah, Georgia. He also serves as the Managing Editor and Creative Director of [The Pillow Talk Project](#), a website dedicated to helping men—and those who love them—rediscover the power of everyday intimate conversations through celebrating

their stories about their own journeys into manhood. I am super excited about this partnership since they just received funding to continue doing this work.

This engagement project is about learning to make connections with words rather than fists. This is about letting young men of color know that their experiences are not isolated and that they are not alone even when they are taught to remain stoic, in-control and dominant. This is about feeling a sense of community and a source of inspiration. This is about hope. With this project, I wanted to provide the space and experience for them to feel comfortable determining their own future; their own path; their own identity apart from societal expectations because this affects more than just boys and men, this affects everyone.

One of the biggest life lessons I have from this program is that we have to form relationships rather than just audiences to form connections strong enough to affect change, and we need to go deep and address the mental models that people hold that perpetuate the events and patterns and trends that we traditionally cover. We need to actually change power dynamics, create space for opportunity and decentralize work as a way of building trust, yes, and also so that it is easier, more fluid and more sustainable. We need to spend time to produce journalism that will be of best service to specific communities in need. I am proud to call myself a social journalist who will advocate for underrepresented and misunderstood people.

- Published Writing: Healing Together Campaign with [ABMOC at PolicyLink](#)
 - I wrote this piece as part of a five-story series on those who are economically insecure, which is one-third of the country. Since my supervisor knew that I was working with boys and men of color for this program, she connected me with the Alliance for Boys and Men of Color, based in Oakland and Los Angeles, which brought me to Long Beach, California to cover a two-day training on how to engage boys and men on the topic of curbing domestic violence and keeping communities accountable for perpetuated cycles of violence, harm and problematic relationships. I talked to boys and men at the conference as well as the organizers of it in the creation of this piece. In addition to this story, I wrote a [Medium post](#) in which I link to the other four stories in the series.
- [This Multimedia Piece](#) Briefly annotate this link with a short summary and description of your process.
- I tried to write a data piece that highlighted the leading causes of death for men and chart and compare statistics across states but there was a mishap with the data visualization so I ended up writing this [data piece](#). I showed how many after school programs there are and compared them to the one I worked with for this project. I used a useful tool called Infogram to make my charts.
- I have been using this [Twitter account](#) and this [Instagram account](#) to distribute my work and engage my community. I wanted to and continue to solicit responses and ideas from people via call outs and other engagement questions. I also share links to articles and other resources related to less rigid expressions of manhood.
- [Link to the ethical guidelines I developed for my community](#)

- <http://boyswillbe.tilda.ws/>
- [Link to my product prototype](#) from our startup sprint course. This is a walk through of my thinking and planning for my engagement project, it's reach and impact.