

June 8, 2006

Lifestyle

Making a better man

By **Anthony Bonaparte, The Suburban**

The small group is barely five minutes into a three-hour meeting when in walks Jean-Louis. The middle-aged man smiles and casually sits in one of the chairs that form the circle. John, one of the group's leaders, leans forward and asks, So what did you do to prevent you from getting here on time?

Jean-Louis faces a barrage of pointed questions until he finally admits he was delayed watching 20 extra minutes of a Seinfeld re-run. Those minutes of stolen time make him feel like he was doing something illicit and somehow, it gives him a feeling of control.

Do you do this when you're meeting with your son?, asks John.

There are upwards of 30,000 men worldwide who are members of the Mankind Project (MKP), a progressive educational and training organization for men, with 38 interdependent centres located around the world. The aim of the organization is to help men release their emotions by learning how to better identify and communicate their feelings. The group also strives to turn men into good role models, so they can become better fathers. By examining their restrained relationships with their own dads, group members work on not repeating the patterns with their sons.

Meetings like the one described above take place every second Tuesday evening at the Westmount YMCA where as many as 30 men gather regularly to challenge themselves and each other to take personal responsibility for their actions and their relationships.

We're really about creating a safe place for men to dump some stuff here, so he doesn't bring it back home, says David Cordes, a 43-year-old father of three, and member of MKP.

Cordes, who has been married for 15 years, said before he joined MKP several years ago, he was always good at being the party guy, but when alone, felt sad and isolated. He learned about the group from a brochure. Eventually, he went on the training adventure weekend, an intense experience designed to help each man get in touch with his inner truth. Cordes says he came back in an altered state. The experience was like blowing the lid off a volcano.

My wife said [when I got back] I was just thinking and taking deep breaths, he says.

Cordes says he grew up with a lot of pent-up anger and hated his father for nearly 20 years. He credits the MKP for giving him the tools to reconcile with his father, and for him to become a better father.

The meetings, or circles, in Westmount are either open, or closed. The open circles are free of charge and welcomes newcomers who may eventually go on to enroll in MKP's New Warrior Training Adventure. Men become full members of the MKP only after they have attended a New Warrior Training Adventure weekend.

Usually, men who do the warrior weekend are part of these closed circles, in which they do work that sometimes can get quite intense, says Jean-Louis. This is an open circle in which people are invited just to come and see.

But John Closs says, I'm here because I really believe men need a circle. In other cultures, men have been sitting in circles for ages and Closs believes it's for good reasons talking, sharing and communicating.

Closs is a 55-year-old computer technician with the LBPSB and has been attending regular meetings since 1997 when a business acquaintance introduced him to the MKP. That year, he attended Montreal's first Warrior Weekend, held at the Old Brewery Mission's Camp Chapleau in the Laurentians.

Before going on the trip, Closs spoke to his wife and she was very supportive. He shares with her what he has gained from the circles, but never reveals what he may have seen or heard from others. My wife knows what I do, says the father of two adult children.

Confidentiality plays a big part in circles. What I see here and hear here stays here, says Cordes. It's about creating a safe container for men to share and take a look at things that they may not be comfortable to do outside of this place, or here, without that commitment from the group.

There's a belief that every decision and choice I make is not isolated to one situation, that patterns exist inside of me that show up in a whole bunch of different areas. So the accountability piece is one way for a man to peel back a layer of the onion and take a bigger look at his life, says Cordes.



Photo by Martin Chamberland, The Suburban

John Closs and David Cordes: Mankind Project challenges men to live to their full potential.



Cordes (with Closs): Men have been sitting in circles for ages.