

# ***WOMEN'S ENEWS***

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## **Men Join Battle to End Violence Against Women**

**By Jennifer Friedlin, WeNews Correspondent**

(WOMENSENEWS) – James Soto is surrounded by misogynistic messages. Just 12 years old, Soto says he often hears young men hanging out in his neighborhood use language that degrades women and kids at school mimic the lyrics of raunchy hip-hop songs. But rather than adopt a negative attitude toward women and girls, Soto decided to join Boys to Men, a group that helps adolescent boys learn to respect members of the opposite sex.

“I don’t want to be like the people that are on the street selling drugs and the guys cursing out the women, calling them the ‘b’ word,” says a soft spoken Soto who lives on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. “I want to be a respectful and responsible man.”

Boys to Men is one of many programs that have sprung up across the country to educate boys and men about the dangers of sexist attitudes that can lead to violence against females. These groups focus on challenging participants’ negative stereotypes of women and seek to educate men about their role in creating healthy relationships, free of physical and sexual violence, a phenomenon that affects about one in three women at some point in their lives.

People behind these programs say that over the last decade they realized that efforts to stop abuse against women and children had focused on educating women to speak out against the violence. Meanwhile, abusive men were offered treatment and non-abusive men were left out of the equation.

“Well into the 90s violence programs talked about treatment for men, but not about engaging men,” said Esta Soler, executive director of the Family Violence Prevention Fund based in San Francisco. “We realized that we could only get so far if men were not a part of the dialogue.”

### **Engaging Men to Stop Abuse**

In response to that realization as well as a 2000 study conducted by the Family Violence Prevention Fund that showed that at least a quarter of men would do more to stop violence against women if they were asked, the organization began launching several programs and high profile campaigns to engage men.

Recently, the fund invested \$250,000 in national public service announcements that turn the table on the topic of violence against women and girls. Rather than focus on victims, the television ads feature young boys asking the men in their lives such questions as: “How can I grow up to respect women when I have such lousy role models?” and “I’ve been getting mixed messages about women and violence, I need a little clarification.”

The ads, which ran throughout the National Basketball Association's playoffs, are designed to be "a little disarming" and to get people to think about when and how attitudes are formed, said Soler.

In addition, Soler's group has also attracted several big name celebrities, sports figures and businessmen to another effort. Started last year, the Founding Fathers campaign asks men to sign a declaration opposing violence against women and children.

At a news conference in midtown Manhattan in June, New York Yankees manager Joe Torre joined hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons, Liz Claiborne CEO Paul Charron and Gateway Computer chair Ted Waitt to announce the second year of the national campaign. A full-page ad listing the signatories to the declaration runs today in The New York Times to commemorate Father's Day.

Torre, himself the product of an abusive household, told the press conference that he feels personally responsible to teach his athletes to be more respectful of women.

"You tell them to be aggressive, go out there and beat somebody up, go out there and win a ballgame, and unfortunately when they go out on a date that night they don't take 'no' for an answer," said Torre.

Recalling how his father, a former New York City police officer, beat his mother and created an atmosphere of fear and tension in the house, Torre said he wants to let people know that domestic violence is not just a "woman's issue."

"The scars that a child takes into adulthood don't go away," said Torre, who also founded the Safe at Home Foundation to fight domestic violence in honor of his mother.

Ron Levant, the founder of the Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinity, a division of the American Psychological Association, said that the recent efforts to get men involved in the fight against violence could have a significant effect.

"Women have been at the forefront (on issues of domestic violence) and men's voices have been few and far between," said Levant, also the dean of psychology at Nova Southeastern University in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. "We have to confront our brothers and say, 'that's not cool.'"

Other members of the Founding Fathers campaign have also been working to end abuse by turning the workplace into a safe haven. Charron of Liz Claiborne said that his company encourages women and men to speak out on relationship violence through its Love is Not Abuse program.

Through this program, Liz Claiborne has point people in its security, legal and human resources divisions available to assist anyone facing domestic abuse to leave the situation and seek legal remedies. The company also publishes pamphlets and books geared for men, women and children about gender violence and domestic abuse.

## Breaking Stereotypes

Many of the educators who work on the grassroots level teaching boys and men about relationship abuse and violence against women say their biggest challenge is to teach people to rethink stereotypes that permeate U.S. culture.

Donald McPherson, who spent seven years as a pro-football player for teams including the Philadelphia Eagles and Houston Oilers, is now the executive director of the Sports Leadership Institute at Adelphi University in Garden City, N.Y. He says he is not interested in teaching his students that violence is illegal and could put a perpetrator in jail.

Instead, McPherson focuses on teaching his young charges that everything from the language they use like “you throw like a girl” and “don’t be a sissy” to movie titles like “White Chicks” are implicitly negative towards women.

“We don’t raise boys to be men, we raise them not to be women,” said McPherson. “In order to truly change behavior, we have to challenge the norm.”

For Elio Cruz, 18, participating in a program called Men Can Stop Rape in Washington, D.C., helped him to understand that the messages he was getting from society were not always healthy. By attending the organization’s weekly hour-long sessions throughout his senior year of high school, Cruz learned that the music he hears and the pictures he sees in movies and advertisements he often portray women in a negative light.

Today, Cruz, a freshman at Marymount University in Arlington, Va., says he has more respect for the women he dates and a keener sense of his role in trying to make sure that his 10-year-old sister does not take the lyrics of her favorite pop music too seriously.

“I tell her to be aware of what they are saying,” said Cruz. “I try and teach her that the way society depicts women gives people the wrong idea about women.”

Jennifer Friedlin is a writer based in New York.

For more information:

Men Can Stop Rape: <http://www.mencanstoprape.org>

Joe Torre Safe at Home Foundation: <http://www.joetorre.net>

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