Norberg-Bohm

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In this podcast we talk with Craig Norberg-Bohm, Coordinator of the Men’s Initiative for Jane Doe Inc. in Massachusetts about the Responsible Fatherhood Program.

Q: What drew you to prevention?

A: What drew me to prevention is an interesting question. I’ve been at this for a few years. In 1977 I helped found a project in St. Louis, Missouri called RAVEN, Rape and Violence End Now. And we did that because my sister had been raped and I did that then because a girlfriend had been raped then I figured I had been raped. And it was all kind of an awareness of what do I need to do. I was in engineering school and I wasn’t connecting and I found out that it was really about that and about my own manhood. And so I found looking for something I needed to do and so I got into the work in those years. I got involved with men’s work and men’s movement and I find that I love men, I love boys, I want to be better, we want to be better, I want to take responsibility, so I got into it and made it my career. And I helped found an intervention program that eventually worked primarily with men who batter and working with a volunteer project that brought community men in to learn to facilitate and men in trouble to get some care and to kind of walk through it together. And so that went on, it’s still going on in St. Louis project called RAVEN, and about 10 years into it I was kind of done with the intervention work and felt kind of at a stagnate place with it. Moved from St. Louis to the North East, to the Boston and Massachusetts area, and got involved with some boards of directors, community projects, but did different kind of work for about 10 more years. And then came a realization that I needed to get to a place where community conversation was stronger about this. How do we bring the work that happens within work that had been going on, such as work with men who batter, so that all men learn about it; all men benefit and are brought forward from the material. Because, remain private, as much as we want this to be a public issue and a public conversation for men to be inspired to change, it remains private. To this day it remains relatively private that it’s, even we do group work but it’s with men yet to get in the serious trouble to find help. And so prevention is a movement from that to a public folk community conversation and responsibility and that’s what I’m working on now.

Q: How do you think sexual violence is going to end?

A: Well, we just sort of said one of the ways is a full complete community responsibility for it. Then it will end. As long as we consider that it’s strictly individual illness and accident it won’t end. It’s comfortable to think that way because then you feel in charge of, or able to insulate yourself from it. That you can feel safe from it, as long it’s something an individual can do. In fact it’s frequently not something individual can prevent. It happens because someone else chose to do it to you and so it’s a, if it remains private it won’t end. If it remains part of culture, it won’t end. It’s part of male culture. Rapism is part of strong men culture and its part of strength culture. Pick anybody, male female, its part of strength culture to be able to take over someone else. So, it will end when we all decide that it’s time for it to end, maybe this afternoon. But I think we need to have some humor about the whole thing. You know, it’s not an easy subject to discuss but it’s about health and it’s about promoting health. And well, the rest of our topic is going to address this question about where we can go with it.

Q: What sparked your interest in working with the responsible fatherhood program?

A: I’m here, talking at the conference this year about connecting with responsible fatherhood groups and I came to that years ago, a dad myself, and I have been working with men in many ways. And the movement I’m a part of includes working with dads as dads. It also includes, it has engaged and separated from, men being angry for losing in court and losing in custody and alimony and access to their kids in some criminal process, or non-criminal divorce process. And there are organizations that spring from victimization and there’s a whole community of men’s organizations that are sprung from this specific issue and they’re called Father’s Rights Organizations. We also call them Men’s Rights Organizations but they’re primarily Father’s Rights Organizations and there’s an agenda, a political agenda, there’s a social change agenda, and most of the men who stick with that are men who are feel like they have a mission to fight back and get, they figure they have no place to go within the court system to achieve what they need. There’s a dimension of that community that’s very dangerous. A dimension that’s sees particularly the battered women’s movement as their opposition, and them without the power and the women’s movement with the power. The battered women’s organizations and advocates hear from the father’s rights community all the time and the men that are vocal and angry with them and it’s usually an obnoxious contact. In our area, in Massachusetts, there are several men’s rights organizations, father’s rights organizations, that have a strong political agenda and we oppose that agenda, and we’re not supportive of their agenda, but we dialogue with these folks – they want to dialogue with us. So occasionally we have conversations, every so often these conversations go a step or two in the right direction. But as a rule, it’s not a fruitful conversation. What we are teaching our members, I work with the state coalition in Massachusetts and we are working with our members to distinguish between what we might call a father’s rights program and a fatherhood program, and you can ask a couple of questions to distinguish the programs and one distinguishing question is ‘Is the program teaching parenting and engaging men in parenting skills?’ Second question ‘Is this program working for legal rights for dads?’ Rarely do programs do both. Some do, you can’t always distinguish between these things. But for the most part there’s a blossoming community of folks working with dads as dads, celebrating dads celebrating parenting and bringing dad into the picture where they may not have been brought into the picture before. And that’s the community I’m talking about as being a community that we have an opportunity to work with from the perspective of accomplishing primary prevention.

Q: Was the collaborative relationship process smooth, or did it require additional reflection and dialogue?

A: There’s a real history to working with the fatherhood programs in our neck of the woods. The question is, is it a smooth process, is the collaboration easy or is it difficult, or is it changed over the years. Well, all that is true. Sometimes it’s easy, sometimes it’s hard. There is a history to it and myself, I happen to enjoy having been in the process long enough to have seen all of it grow and separate and come back together. And the separation is are you in it as a male positive promotional work about men’s lives and embracing kind of a uplifting of men in roles of life, are you there to prevent men’s violence, are you there to stop men from doing horrible things, and there’s a division in some programs doing one or the other in their work. So, batterers intervention as it’s called today, or responsible fatherhood work as it’s called today, grew up into separate paths. And there was a timeframe some years ago, 15-20, where it was an argument from the batterers intervention people looking at the fatherhood folks ‘you’re harboring criminals, you’re not strong enough, you’re not screening men who are causing trouble, you’re not accomplishing accountability, you’re actually colluding with the enemy, you’re hugging too much’. You can think of it humorously, ‘you’re being too kind’. You had to be confrontive and identify whose doing damage and letting them get away with it. The other side of the picture, fatherhood folks looking at folks who do work with men who batter, ‘you’re hard-nosed, you hate men, you don’t give men an opportunity to demonstrate the good that they can do, and you don’t believe in men’s growth’. So are you about personal growth or are you about accountability? Is that all, is that our choice? And so, there have been a dialogue about his specifically from the African American community and other communities of color about saying we’re not going to throw our men away. And actually fatherhood is the good place where we want men to work and that’s where our men are working and we want to give men who are particularly new at parenting, who may be non-custodial and are getting otherwise a raw deal from the welfare system, something that is good. And so we think that fatherhood programs are the way to go. And so we have a sort of new embrace of this work that comes out of that side and we’re working to help connect. And so at this stage we’re at a point where a dialogue has occurred. A conversation between the domestic violence advocacy side and the responsible fatherhood side of the community work have been dialoguing about cooperating and now there’s, in certain places, strong cooperation that is now taking place. And responsible fatherhood programs have adopted domestic violence prevention as something that they’re doing. And I can talk about the detail of that but there, for the most part, it is embraced. And some cross training has occurred for the folks working with offenders to think about their embrace of what good men can do and how they can, if they’re dads and one of the example titles of a program is fathering after violence and how do you continue to be a dad and having done these bad things to their mom, as an example. So, smooth sometimes not so smooth other times. It’s getting better.

Q: Why do you think engaging men, and father sin particular, is integral to ending sexual violence?

A: Dads have a unique role to play in their kids’ lives. Mothers do too. The unique role that men play is about showing what men are like and what men are supposed to be. Dads are as powerful as that of anyone in a kid’s life. There are other role models. They learn from their peers, they learn from coaches, you learn from heroes. But dads have got a spot, and they’ve got an important spot and therefore the piece of sexual violence is about privilege and entitlement, dads are going to either support or deny. Or about is being a man a taking role and a privilege role or is it a partnership role? Dads model that. So you have an opportunity as a father to set the stage for a child’s life in this dimension. And so there’s the opportunity. It’s an opportunity and so it turns out the majority of responsible fatherhood curriculums are great. They do exactly what we’d like them to do. And that’s what we’re here to do, is celebrate and appreciate them for doing that and asking for some collaboration to get some help with them on parenting education and we’d like to suggest a few things to do on teaching healthy sexuality, which is a missing component in most of the programs. And so this is what we have to work on together. So it’s a great opportunity, it’s positive, it’s promotional, it’s starting in a place where you’re an ally, you can do good work. Let’s do good work together.

Q: What is one thing you want people to take away from your NSAC workshop?

A: That this is an opportunity. That we want to take away from the workshop at our conference here today that this is an opportunity. That if you are, if you’re interested in prevention you need to learn that partnership is the key. That I’m one but there are many that need to change. And so you have to amplify and duplicate your efforts and you do that through partnership. And one of the partnership you have an opportunity to work with are folks working with dads as parenting education programs which are growing and so it’s an opportunity for partnership in a way that is perfectly situated to accomplish our goals.

For more information on the National Sexual Violence Resource Center please go to www.nsvrc.org or call toll free at 877-739-3895. The NSVRC was founded by the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape and is supported in large part with funds from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.