

## 20 feature male mentors

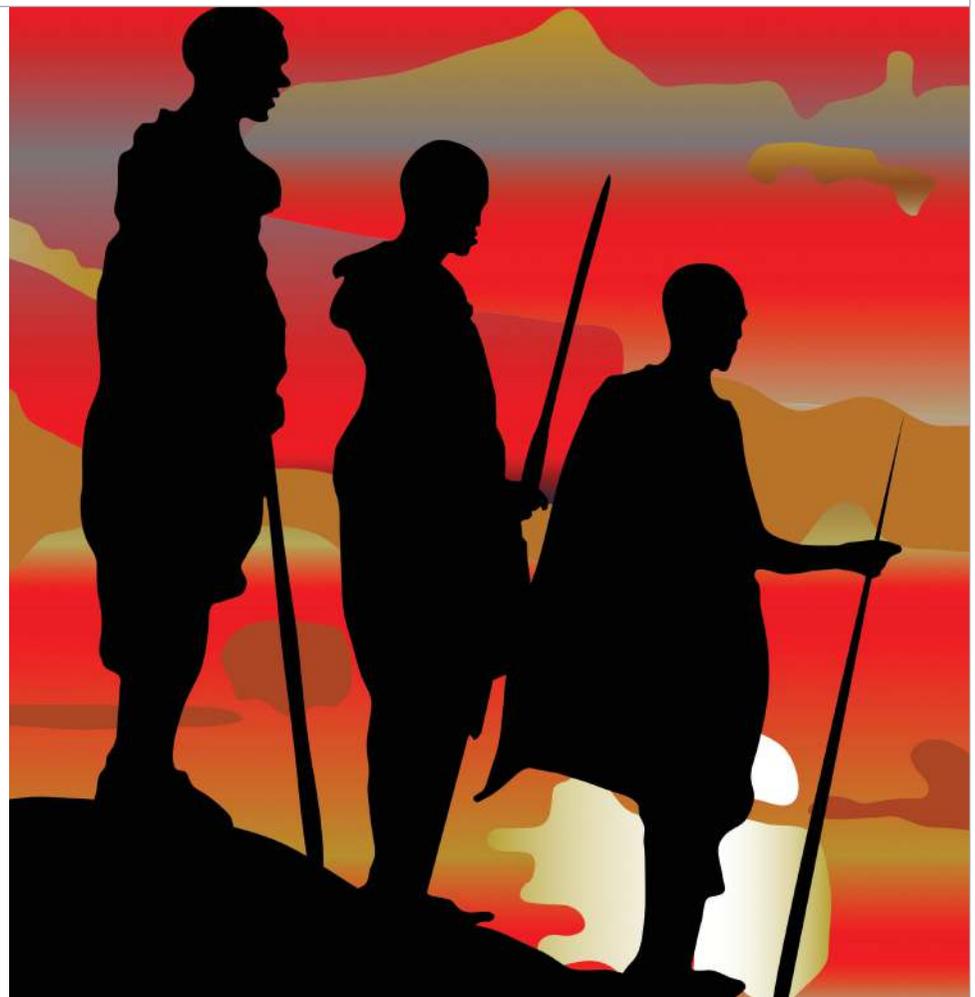
**M**any of us may inherently understand that it “takes a village to raise a child” but for the most part, the tribes and the villages have disappeared, along with their traditions. Family units are now increasingly isolated and under pressure – and so the need for local community engagement becomes ever more imperative.

When considering the problem of how to engage potentially disaffected young men, there is much to learn from the past. Throughout history, if a tribe or community was to survive, its adult men had to get together and act collectively to take responsibility for engaging the adolescent males as the next generation. This process of transition to adulthood was part of what anthropologists call ‘rites of passage’ and has only relatively recently been devolved to teachers, social workers or even parents. Throughout millennia, successful methods of channelling male energy have involved teamwork, discipline and finding an appropriate place in a well-led hierarchy. In more recent times, sport, with its physicality and its codified rules, has proved invaluable in helping youngsters to discover a concept of discipline and fairness that underpins all human ideas of justice.

But generally in our modern society, there has been a gradual disconnection of adult males from what the famous psychiatrist Erik Erikson called “generativity” or concern for establishing and guiding the next generation. From the industrial revolution onwards, bonds between boys and adult men have steadily eroded. Over the past 50 years, they have quietly been abandoned to the mercy of the mass market. The gulf between youth and experience has widened; society is now most “broken” between generations of males.

Technology and consumerism have obviously altered society drastically, and the reality is that our consumer economy is generally not invested in boy’s transition to manhood. Indeed, maintaining high levels of consumption relies upon youthful self-indulgence – not the kind of level-headed, mature judgment an adult man might provide. Where the families are weakest, cynical commercialism has triumphed most. So while schools stress civilised behaviour, rational thought, safety and discipline, at the same time the commercial world broadcasts its powerful message that happiness consists of instant gratification, a cool image, personal self-indulgence and lowest common denominator screen-based entertainment.

At a certain point, it is natural that boys move beyond the family and spend time interacting with and learning from adult men who they respect and who act as role models. Every young man needs to discover his



# From boys to men

In the absence of positive role models, many adolescent males are seeking identity in mass market consumerism at best, or drugs, gangs and anti-social behaviour at worst. Here, **Michael Boyle** of UK charity **Abandofbrothers** argues for the recreation of the traditional “rites of passage” to turn boys into men using male mentors to reconnect them to their community.

personal power and how to use it wisely, but in a world devoid of male mentors or guides, he can only identify with distant media figures on screen and will seek his own rite of passage, turning to whatever means available in a desperate search for identity, personal power, limits and a meaningful sense of participation in something larger than himself. Breaking rules, anti-social sensation

seeking, drugs, a gang, a cult, risk taking behaviour are all natural means of seeking this. If a young man defines himself only externally, that is by how well he measures up to society’s expectations, he is prone to be emotionally unstable, have low self-esteem, shame and depression faced with the chronic implication that something is wrong with him.

Robert Putnam, a professor of Public Policy at Harvard University, in his book, *Bowling Alone*, first used the term “social capital” to describe the trust, mutual support, co-operation and reciprocity in relationships that bind people together in community. Statistically, he claimed, the correlation between high “social capital” and positive outcomes for youth development is “as close to perfect as social scientists ever find in data analysis of this sort”. Community is most powerfully formed through shared meaningful experience. In this regard, the concept of rites of passage can provide a compelling context for stimulating and mobilising “social capital”. At a time when much state support inadvertently encourages ever more social reliance, rites of passage traces a path from dependence to independence and ultimately towards the truth of inter-dependence.

So, there is a strong argument that we can recreate what local young men actually need by recruiting and training local men as mentors, thereby arresting the decline of social connectedness and uniting the local community and its elders in a shared and meaningful cause. Viewed through the lens of rites of passage, the mentor acts on behalf of the larger community, a midwife of sorts, assisting in the birth of character in a young person. This is a very different approach from adopting a treatment plan that is measurable, time effective, and solution focused – often behaviour modification language for: “We want you to get this young person adjusted and conforming to the system as soon as possible.” It is the healthy youngster who will recognise that mass society is largely superficial, unjust and inauthentic. Given the option between rebellion and conformity, even minor rebellion is an empowered choice.

### TOM, THE MENTEE: “IT WAS SCARY AND EMBARRASSING BUT GOOD”

“I was 14, I'd got into bad stuff like smoking cannabis daily and taking coke. I'd been violent at home, I'd been referred to the Youth Offending Service for three months and Dan there told me about the weekend, The Quest, that Abandofbrothers (ABOB) run. I didn't have a clue what it was about but in the end I went. That was two years ago and basically it changed my life. It was scary but what I experienced was like no other course I'd been on. It's not an “us and them” situation, with ABOB we're all brothers on an equal footing. You can trust every man in that group, which means that I would really go into the bad stuff that happened in my life and express things that I'd never been able to do before. For instance, there's an anger stone bit where you really get to scream and shout in a healthy way that doesn't hurt anyone. It's embarrassing but it's good.

Lots of organisations give up on you but ABOB don't. At the end of the weekend, my mentor Finn came and sat next to me. I could feel a connection with him straight away. After that, he supported me through a lot. It wasn't easy. I was in foster care, I got arrested, I was angry, but he kept on going with me. That made all the difference. He kept on sending me caring texts even if I was not answering my phone. Now I'm living back with my mum, who's been amazing, I haven't been violent and I've started college where I'm hoping to become a hairdresser. Recently, I helped to staff The Quest for young men who'd been in prison. That made me understand even more what an important experience it is. It felt really good to support other men. That's what I mean, we become a circle of men. I intend to go on being in that circle even though I live in Kent now and Finn is no longer my mentor. I'll still carry on meeting up with him, he's been such a brilliant part of my life.

If a young man is supported in not orienting to gain social acceptance at any cost he can learn how and where his authentic self fits into the social world and where it doesn't.

‘Rites of passage’ is both a developmental and transformational way of ritually recognising that entry into adult life involves the realisation of social obligations and the assumption of a responsibility for meeting them. Its very framework challenges adults and youth professionals to access their own maturity, emotional authenticity and integrity in engaging youth. By providing a language that puts youth and adults on an equal footing and by disclosing a form of self-understanding that is felt in the heart rather

than learned in the head, it demands an awareness of adult roles and responsibilities that benefits the whole community and future generations.

**Abandofbrothers is a UK charity attempting to recreate contemporary rites of passage through mobilising local men to engage with potentially disaffected young people and providing specialist leadership training for youth professionals. It has recently been commissioned by MIND to work with men who will talk to young men with mental health issues, as well as Sussex Police to work with young men coming out of prison. Visit [www.abandofbrothers.org.uk](http://www.abandofbrothers.org.uk) for more.**

### A MENTOR'S STORY – FINN, THE WEB DESIGNER WHO BECAME A MALE ROLE MODEL

“I'm 40, run a web design company and a friend had become involved with Abandofbrothers (ABOB). Something hit the right note with me. It sounded like an effective way of engaging young men in the community and felt like something I wanted to do. I wasn't really aware of the rites of passage element but I knew that this was missing in modern society. I realised that, often, young people are pushed into excess such as drinking and drugs because they don't have the boundaries created by these rites of passage.

ABOB's weekend course for mentors, called Beyond The Hero, allowed me to have a space for profound reflection and to go back into the past and really express anger, shame, sadness in a way that I hadn't done before. We learn to express ourselves as men, so that we know how to support the young men in that way. Becoming a mentor with ABOB is different because we don't pretend to know all the answers, we don't tell young men what to do, it's all about being able to embrace our imperfections as men and young men. Mainly, we are honest and open, then we invite the young men into this space and

make it safe for them to open up in a way they probably haven't experienced before.

As well as one to one contact, every week, we have a circle of brothers where we share our feelings, vulnerability and what's happening to us. It's about building up that trust and community. It's a very positive way of using group power. I met up with Tom for 18 months, once or twice a week. I was impressed by how keen he was to turn up. It was sometimes difficult for him in the circle because he was younger and his father was a drug addict who died, so he didn't have a healthy male role model in his life. I made sure that Tom could tell me what was really going on for him. There was a lot of pain and hurt masked by anger but gradually he realised he could be sad rather than angry. Sometimes, we'd do role-play together. Sometimes, we'd just chat. Sometimes, I'd be challenging, others I'd be softer.

I'm really happy that he's living with his mother again and that he's at college. I'll be seeing him again very soon even though I'm no longer his mentor.”