

# SANTA FE BOYS

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION ABOUT THE SITUATION OF BOYS IN SANTA FE

ISSUE NO. 2

WINTER 2004

## Jesús Gonzales and the New Mexico Young Fathers Project

### Breaking the Cycle of Abandonment in Santa Fe

By Paul Golding,  
SFB Editor

To hear the story of Jesús Gonzales, 26, is both painful and inspiring. It is a tragic tale of a Santa Fe boy abandoned by his parents, mired from his twelfth year in juvenile crime, detention centers, half-way houses, shelters, and addictions. Worst of all it is a story of the loss of his baby daughter to adoption when Jesús was 19 because he was declared an unfit parent. But Jesús' narrative also includes a great deal of personal redemption. Above all, there is his ability and desire to "be real with" the other young fathers he supports, to give them hope and to instill in them the aspiration to be a more responsible parent to their children.

Jesús' presence is powerful and, as the Community Coordinator of the NM Young Fathers Project in Santa Fe, he uses this power and the insights from his own experience to try and prevent what happened to him from happening to others. Of this role, he says, "I bring the reality of what it is like to be a young father, to be caught up in the system and feel like you are nothing." Much of Jesús' ability to influence others in a similar situation comes from the courage to lay out the path he has traveled in all its difficult



Jesús Gonzales

truth. Now he is able to help young men stay in their children's lives, and to see that the cycle that comes from parental abandonment and leads back to parental abandonment is broken.

Listening to Jesús requires your willingness to take a trip into a long tunnel of despair that leads at one point to Springer, NM, where the New Mexico Boys School is located. His journey includes fights and betrayals, flight from the police, time in front of judges, half-way houses and drug tests. He begins his story at age 12, at the time things really started falling apart. But of course, the despair begins earlier. It begins when his father left and Jesús was too young even to remember him, when his mother started doing drugs, and when Jesús discovered at the age of 12 that the Detention Center was preferable to home because it was clean and he was sure he'd get a decent meal. At that age, however, both

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### The Absent Father

Without intending it, this issue of *Santa Fe Boys* is about missing fathers and their sons. The three articles listed below were written before this theme became clear. All of this fortuitous coming together on the subject of missing dads has raised the following question: is it merely a coincidence that these narratives include this element or is it such a prominent fact of life in New Mexico that missing dads would be part of any discussion of children and the social well-being of families? As if we needed a

statistic to back up what we see around us, we learned a few months ago that in New Mexico 46 per cent of births are to single mothers. In a nation suffering from father absence, New Mexico ranks third highest in the number of families headed by a single parent, overwhelmingly a woman. In stark contrast to what these statistics indicate, abundant research shows that there are benefits to men, children, and families when men are involved with their children.

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# Looking Behind the Statistics

## Boys Three Times More Likely to be Suspended

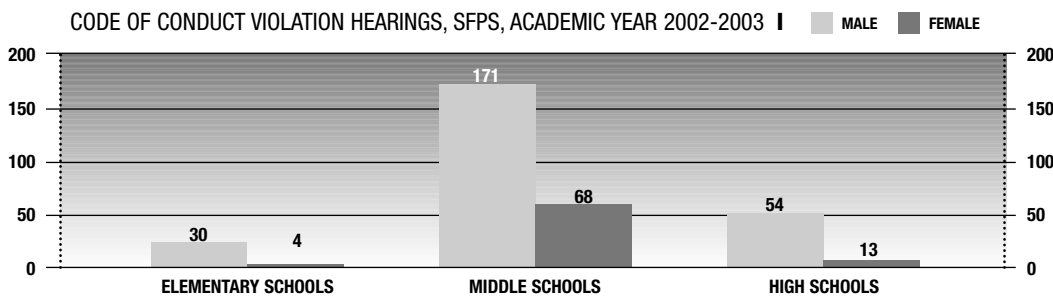
As the chart below shows, male students in Santa Fe Public Schools constituted almost 75 percent of students charged with a serious violation of the Code of Conduct in the last academic year. Violations include carrying a weapon on school grounds, intimidation, and theft. Under SFPS procedures a student who violates the code of conduct has a hearing in front of the school hearing officer, Gloria Lopez. Such hearings result in suspensions from school 90 per cent of the time. Suspensions may last from one day to the remainder of the school year, depending on the severity of

the violation and the number of times a student may have been previously disciplined.

Most of the incidents occurred in Middle Schools where 171 males and 60 females, equivalent to roughly 10 per cent of the middle school population, went through the formal hearing process. Since the statistics show the number of hearings and not individuals, it is possible that some students appeared for a hearing on several occasions.

The Santa Fe Public Schools assistant superintendent, Bobbi Gutierrez views these serious code of conduct violations as among the most important

problems facing the public schools. She says that boys involved at this level of disruptive behavior are likely to be from single parent families, with no healthy male role models in their lives. She speculates that 75 per cent are from families struggling with poverty, where boys do not just get to be boys, but have to demonstrate their ability to be breadwinners. Gutierrez points out that, "We still live in a society where males cannot show their fears. This covering up can be acted out in lots of ways." And one of the ways most commonly witnessed is through conduct disorders.



## What Boys Want . . .

"If we give credence to the research detailing the centrality of affection in father-son relations and the relative irrelevance of the father's 'masculinity,' it becomes clear that boys don't hunger for fathers who will model traditional mores of masculinity. They hunger for fathers who will rescue them from it. They need fathers who have themselves emerged from the gauntlet of their own socialization with some degree of emotional intactness. Sons don't want their father's 'balls'; they want their hearts. And, for many, the heart of a father is a difficult item to come by. Oftentimes, the lost boy the depressed son must recover is the one not he but his father has disavowed."

From *I Don't Want to Talk About It—Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression* by Terrence Real, Scribner, 1997, p. 159.

### For more information about fatherhood and boys:

Pruett, K. *Fatherhood: Why Father Care Is as Essential as Mother Care for Your Child*, pb, 2000, New York, N.Y. Broadway Books, 244 pp.

Kindlon, D., Ph.D. and M. Thompson, Ph.D., *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, 1999, New York, N.Y. Ballantine Books. 287 pp.

## SANTA FE BOYS

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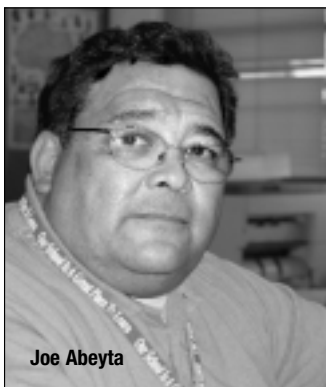
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# Where Have all the Men Gone?

## Santa Fe Public Elementary Schools



Joe Abeyta

Joe Abeyta left a long career in retail to take the most satisfying job of his life: teaching 3rd graders at Carlos Gilbert Elementary School. Now, as he puts it, he experiences daily the “absolute miracle of... watching kids learn.” Perhaps he feels so strongly about teaching because of his own experience growing up in Santa Fe of the 1950’s and 60’s and not being encouraged to look outside his immediate prospects. Perhaps, in addition, he is onto something that few men, raised in the masculine culture emphasizing money and individual achievement, have realized: that the world of connection to others, affecting others’ lives, is more enduring and satisfying.

Joe Abeyta is somewhat unusual. There are 464 teachers in the Santa Fe public elementary schools, but only 75 or 16% are men. In the entire Santa Fe school system, including middle schools and high schools, 26% of the teachers are men. In these low percentages, the Santa Fe Public Schools are hardly alone; these proportions are reflected nationally and also show a steady decline from the levels of men in the profession twenty years ago.

Is it important that elementary school pupils are exposed to

male teachers? Few would question that it is. Indeed, Joe Abeyta, who is in his early 50’s, feels strongly that more men in the profession would lead to a “healthier balance, a different chemistry” in the classroom. As Joe says, “Having a male teacher brings a male point of view, a male way of being” in an atmosphere where it is traditionally absent. It opens kids up to other possibilities and expectations: “They see me doing some things they normally do not see a man doing--cooking pancakes, reading a story, dancing the Hokey Pokey.” Many educators, looking at the statistics that show boys predominate in special education classes and on the bench outside the principal’s office, feel that part of the solution would be to increase the number of male teachers. More male teachers could result in more father friendliness, and hence father involvement, in the schools. More generally, increasing the proportion of male teachers would be part of an effort to redress the tragic absence of men in the lives of young children.

Born on Canyon Road, in the same house where his mother and grandmother were born, Joe attended Cristo Rey Elementary School, St. Michael’s and the College of Santa Fe. But college was not for him when he was young, and after two and a half years he joined the Army and attended the Defense Department Language Institute in Monterrey California, eventually becoming a Spanish language interpreter and translator in Panama.

Joe says that it was not until he left Santa Fe that he realized the opportunities available to him. The schools’ cultural insensitivity, bias against

Hispanics in the way material was taught and tested, and low expectations channeled him (and according to Joe, still channel Hispanic children in Santa Fe) to local colleges and government jobs, while the Anglo kids were encouraged to go to more distant colleges and to aspire to more lucrative positions in business and commerce.

Getting out of Santa Fe opened Joe’s eyes to wider possibilities and eventually to a BA in Spanish Literature and a master’s degree in Public Administration. He also realized an aptitude for managing others in a career that culminated in several high level retail management positions in Albuquerque. As a manager he learned how much he enjoyed teaching employees. He especially discovered his interest in helping those who saw themselves as inferior to or less capable than others.

It was clear to Joe when he finally decided to leave retail that teaching would be the new direction for him. After enrolling in the UNM/SFPS Teacher Internship Program, for people who already had degrees but needed a teacher’s license, he found his dream job at Carlos Gilbert Elementary School.

While teaching has proven to be a satisfying job for Joe, he does have some comments on the frequently cited problems for men (and sometimes for women) in the profession. First, as Joe puts it, “the pay is terrible.” He would not be able to pursue a career in teaching if it were not for savings from his former life in retail. A teacher’s salary is only a “second income” and few in Joe’s school would be able to survive on it alone, he says.

Another problem, often cited

by men who teach elementary school, is the fear of being charged with sexual or other misconduct. Joe feels that there is some validity to this fear. He was once accused of hitting a boy, an accusation from which he was cleared by the SFPS personnel department. Joe does not think this charge would have been leveled so readily at a female teacher. He also feels that for some boys challenging a male teacher is more acceptable and can therefore lead to problems for a teacher.

One other issue for men in elementary teaching is the perceived “feminine nature” of the work and the low social status often ascribed to elementary school teachers. To this Joe advises: “Get over it!” Perhaps for him, having been educated among the Brothers at St. Mike’s, male teachers were role models. Joe finds that he receives praise from many people, men and women, for what he is doing. Many men tell him that someday they would like to follow his example.

Questions such as low pay, fear of being unjustly charged with sexual or other misconduct, and the perceived feminine nature of the work, however, are small for Joe compared to the day to day experience of teaching and some of its more subtle emotional rewards. Generally, as the school year progresses, Joe notes that he is “amazed at how many kids call me dad, uncle or grandpa.” They follow it up quickly with: “Oh, I’m sorry, I meant Mr. Abeyta.” To Joe, it is not only satisfying to see his students learn, but also to know that in the process they have achieved a level of comfort and familiarity that allows them to associate learning with the tender feelings of family.

# Leon David Lopez, Portrait of a Young Poet

Leon David Lopez is a poet, a former Santa Fe gang affiliate, and an honors graduate of New Mexico State University. In his 23 years, he has experienced the emotional rollercoaster that defines many young men in Northern New Mexico and elsewhere. For Leon the details include an alcoholic father who was often abusive and violent and gang affiliation with the West Side Locos, from his Gonzales Elementary School days until he went to college. He has also suffered feelings of anger and depression, emotions that he has taken out on those closest to him.

For children the balance between positive and negative forces can often be a fine one. In Leon's case he was able to count on several positive influences in his life to keep him on the healthy side of that divide. One of these has been the thoughtful and protective concern of his mother. She knew he needed to get away from his gang environment and so worked hard to send him to St. Michael's High School. There was also a caring grandfather, a male role model, for whom Leon always felt the obligation to make more of himself, even after his grandfather died of cancer when Leon was 14. And, ironically, there were the West Side Locos, Leon's friends, who always respected his hard work and good grades, even while they brought him closer to the juvenile justice system than he cares to think about. Finally, there is Leon's relationship with poetry and his affiliation with his new "gang" of young poets and Jimmy Santiago Baca, the nationally known Santa Fe born poet, writer, and actor. All these poetry-connected supports have helped Leon give voice to his suffering, and in the process become a powerful communicator of his feelings.

Recalling the influence of his grandfather when Leon was a small boy, he says, "It felt like he was the only person who made me feel safe. When he was dying, I requested that he ask God to allow him . . . to replace my guardian angel. . ." Leon is convinced that because of his grandfather's protection, he has avoided some very close calls, to jail and even death. He carries a tattoo on his right shoulder of a cross with his grandfather's name on it: "Arthur J. Serna." The cross, symbolizing Leon's faith, is on the right shoulder because that is where his guardian angel stands.

Leon has suffered deeply from depression and, as his poetry ("I'm Sorry") depicts, has considered suicide. He attributes the root of his depression to his genetic inheritance and what he was exposed to as a small boy, which he describes powerfully in his poem "Life Through the Eyes of This Man." The depression came to a head while he was at NMSU, and in his third year he lost all interest in his studies of economics and management. Recalling one of those days, when he was feeling really terrible, he says, "I picked up a pen and started to write my feelings. I went for two years without showing anyone my poetry. Things just stayed on the paper, feelings of sadness and hopelessness, relieving weights off my soul." Only his mother knew what he was doing.

Leon had never read a poetry book, but was affected by the lyrics of rapper Tupac Shakur. "He could write about his experiences, his feelings of hopelessness and how others related to him," Leon says. It impressed him to learn how listeners were moved, how they identified with Shakur and now, he says, "I am surprised how people react to what I have written." Leon is especially impressed by how children in elementary schools, where he often provides poetry workshops, can understand the scenes of violence he describes. It surprises the teachers to hear how much their young students are exposed to outside the classroom.

In Albuquerque, during a year off from NMSU, when he found himself writing to deal with his depression, he read an article in *New Mexico Magazine* about a *curandera* from Chupadero. Something in her eyes attracted Leon and he decided to visit her. The *curandera*, for her part, was struck by Leon's voice and eventually connected it to his attempts to communicate through poetry. She advised Leon to meet Jimmy Santiago Baca. Taking the advice seriously, Leon found a photo of Baca on the Internet. He realized that this man was more than just a well-known poet; he was also the actor he had seen in the film, *Blood In, Blood Out*, which was written by Baca. Though set in Los Angeles the movie for Leon was strangely reminiscent of Northern New Mexico.

Late that night Leon contacted Baca via a long e-mail, mentioning the meeting with the *curandera*. By 7 the next morning, he received

a welcoming reply. Leon recalls, "Through e-mail we had an instant connection. I was so amazed that he would want to meet me." He describes how Baca invited him to a writers' workshop where Leon was asked to read his poetry for the first time in front of others. Until that moment, Leon says, "I wasn't even sure it was poetry." Baca, very impressed by what Leon had read, offered to become his mentor, and invited him to join his group of young Albuquerque poets. During the rest of the year, Leon and Baca got to know each other well, and the young poet went on tour with Baca to several poetry readings. Indeed, Leon became so close to his new mentor that he needed reassurance before he returned to NMSU that Baca would still be there for him. At the end of the year away from NMSU, he re-visited the *curandera* who told him, "That's why I sent your spirits together." Leon finished his BA with honors in economics and business management and continues to participate with Baca in poetry readings.

Leon now resides in Albuquerque, but frequently visits Santa Fe, where his mother lives. His new "gang" of poets performs readings and presents workshops throughout the country. They work in schools from the elementary to university level, as well as in correctional facilities, juvenile detention centers, jails, and prisons. The focus of their workshops is to expose unhealthy memories of past painful experiences and, in the process, find positive ways to express suppressed emotions. Leon writes about their work: "Too many children, especially those born of poverty, have experienced such traumas as domestic violence, gang life, drugs and alcohol abuse. We try to reach the students before these bottled up emotions get the best of them, and with the prisoners we try to help them understand the reasons they act the way they do. Poetry is able to connect the opposing worlds inside them, the heart and the mind, and helps in expressing the emotions that often lead to a person's downfall."

The young poets are currently working with students from the Teen Parent Center at Santa Fe High. If you are interested in engaging them for a workshop or reading, they can be contacted at [leonlopez21@hotmail.com](mailto:leonlopez21@hotmail.com) where you can also get Leon's poetry on CD.

**LIFE THROUGH THE EYES OF THIS MAN**

-By Leon David Lopez

Life through the eyes of this man  
 Truly, the only way you could ever understand  
 Raised alone by a single mother  
 Six years later came my little brother  
 A weekend father who only brought fear  
 Never once seeing him without a beer  
 Screaming threats of murder and suicide  
 Inside my mind was the only place to hide  
 Constantly praying for my family's safety  
 Wondering why it is my father would hate me  
 What have I done to deserve threats of death?  
 I'm only ten, yet I can't even rest  
 All the other children go out and play  
 But me, I go to the altar and pray  
 Please Lord, don't let him hurt me or my brother  
 And Please God, don't let him kill my mother  
 Help her to realize she must leave once and for all  
 Before that day comes that he kills us all

Remember that night he was drunk with the gun  
 Me and my mom trapped in the bedroom with no where to run  
 We had to lie on the bed and could not talk  
 We made hand signals because we knew the gun was cocked  
 We held hands and shivered in fear together  
 I was a man, my innocence lost forever  
 Hoping I would give the right answers to his drunken questions  
 Shit, by the age of 10, I could have given psychologists lessons  
 How to distract his attention or defuse the situation  
 I had to! I knew he would pull that trigger, with no hesitation

Hours passed on and morning was near  
 I kept encouraging him to drink Tylenol with his beer  
 Finally he sat and passed out on the couch  
 This was the chance for us to get out  
 My mother grabbed my brother, while I hid his keys  
 We quietly ran out the house, in my mind screaming Please God Please!  
 Let us make it to safety before he awakes  
 Constantly fearing a life ending mistake  
 We got in the truck and headed for Santa Fe  
 I must have watched behind us the entire way  
 Fearing he would be back and worse than ever  
 I secretly hoped his drunken slumber would last forever

We made it to Grandpa's around 6:30am  
 Wrapped in his arms telling me not to worry  
 I was safe now and he would protect us  
 In my heart I knew his words I could trust  
 That was the darkest night I've ever had  
 I came this close to being killed by my dad  
 My mom got wise and left him for good



Leon David Lopez

Just as I always prayed that she would  
 It was my Grandpa that taught me how to be a man  
 Looking back I try to understand  
 But see only distorted visions of love  
 And my birth to this life of a thug

With nothing to gain and everything to lose  
 I chose to write about and expose the abuse  
 Of this scared young child, raped of innocence  
 Looking back, trying to make the least bit of sense  
 Of who I am and what I've become  
 A wondering fool, some think of as dumb  
 Spending his days pondering this crazy life  
 Hours upon hours debating which way is right  
 But I am who I am with no apology  
 A truly blessed Spirit with a curse that follows me

**I'M SORRY**

-By Leon David Lopez

I guess I just wanted to say goodbye  
 Today, all I could think about is how much I wanted to die  
 I feel like a soldier, lost in battles passed  
 Throughout my life, I've asked one question, "How long will this pain last?"  
 Well the truth is upon us, and one I can't deny  
 The only way I can live in peace, is to die  
 It's not so bad, considering all I've been through  
 Born a Catholic, but my soul's been persecuted like a Jew  
 Confined to this concentration camp, somebody named earth  
 I called on God for help, yet I've been waiting since my birth

In my short days, I've hit bottom more than once  
 Manic episodes of depression that seem to last months  
 Hope is lost and it's like faith was never there  
 All life's dreams are destroyed, riddled with despair  
 All I want is peace and a place to relax  
 My mind polluted with evil thoughts and useless facts  
 How could any man ever understand, the suffering I've been through  
 Praying God will offer his hand, while I'm hanging from this roof  
 So what if the church tells me, I'll burn in hell for this sin  
 What the fuck's the difference between that and the life that I'm in?

My father hates me and threatens to kill my mother  
 Blinded by depression, I can't even guide my little brother  
 My grandpa died and took the only love that comforts my soul  
 I carry unbearable guilt from the greed and the drugs I have sold  
 I am a magnet of misery, to life's iron of pain  
 Take a look at my history, each day is the same  
 It will never get better, no matter how many people say it will  
 Nothing in this world could ever change the misery that I feel  
 So, to all those I loved, I'm sorry for the pain I've brought, for I am no longer in  
 denial  
 And to all those who loved me, forgive my weaknesses and remember my smile

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## My Trip With Dad

By William Carson

You never know when a seemingly minor event occurring during an ordinary day will jump out and later appear to have surprising significance. *My Trip With Dad*, a short story written at the third grade level, did that for me several weeks ago – certainly in part because I had recently read the first issue of *Santa Fe Boys*.

As part of a volunteer program at Salazar Elementary School, I was assisting a teacher with students whose reading was not at grade level. She had made copies of twelve or so books for students to read to me and then take home, hopefully to read to a parent or relative. There was quite a range of titles that would appeal to both boys and girls. I spread them out on a table at random so the students could choose what they wanted to read.

The first of the five students was a girl – the other four were boys. She chose *Nancy Rides a Pony*. When she had finished, the first boy came over and, after looking at the various titles, picked *My Trip With Dad*. I noted that with no great interest, but the second boy did the same thing. About halfway through the choosing process the possible significance struck me.

Before the third boy came to the table, I put *My Trip With Dad* up in a corner. He, too, selected it after looking at all the books, as did the fourth boy, though I had put it in the opposite corner. I don't know if these students have fathers at home or have been on such a trip and remember it or would like to go on one. The reason doesn't really make any difference, but the fact that the four picked that title I believe to be significant and to be further evidence – though a simple classroom episode – of the crucial importance of fathers and men in the lives of boys.

William Carson is President of the Salazar Partnership and Vice Chair of the City of Santa Fe Children and Youth Commission.

## We Owe Them No Less

By Lou Levin

Having worked with children for more than 25 years, I am certainly in agreement that boys as a group experience distinct challenges to accomplishing their full development. In school counseling and private therapy, I see many young men who have little awareness of the feeling dimension in their lives, who see power and dominance as their primary goals, and who are relentlessly pushed to reach what has been identified for them as “being a man”—aggressive, domineering, rational, competitive, etc. I also see many in my offices who know that the societal pressures they experience do not feel right, boys who want to know and express their feelings, to choose not to be on a team for which they must dedicate themselves to over-training and total commitment to winning, to talk with friends about meaningful things, to be awed by a lovely Southwestern sunset.

I also agree that a focus on boys' issues, separate from a more general approach, may be necessary. It was not until the American Association of University Women released their study on girls' development that we began to understand the need to change how we educate girls. There is clearly a moment in time when particular concerns, issues, needs must be parsed out of the totality and examined in some attempted purity.

My hope is that the work that is now taking place regarding boys, and being chronicled by this newsletter, is just that. Let's step back, look at the issues that boys have and that affect boys, and see how to best understand them and deal with them.

However, I remain convinced that the real contribution to the development and growth of our society will be when our attention, now informed by what

we have learned in these initial phases, turns to the need for bringing the parts back together for true integration. As I work with boys and girls, that is the vision that I hold in the back of my mind.

We owe them, and ourselves, no less.

Lou Levin, Ph.D., Psychotherapist and (elementary) school counselor

## Understanding Bullying

By Victor LaCerva, MD, FAAP

There has recently been considerable attention devoted to the phenomenon of bullying. Although it continues to be implicated in school shootings, most of the time it is not likely to be serious enough to result in an EMS call. Bullying is nevertheless a significant public health issue, with adverse effects on social functioning and the well-being of our children, as well as long term consequences for both bully and victim. In April, 2001, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported a study of more than 15,000 students where nearly one third of the middle school and high school students surveyed reported being a bully, being bullied, or both. Middle school students were more likely to be affected. An article in the July/August, 2002 issue of the *American Journal of Health Behavior* showed that bullying was correlated with being aggressive and that students who had been bullied were more likely than those who had not to be bullies themselves. In addition, students were more likely to indicate that they had experienced a physical or verbal bullying behavior than to admit that they had been “bullied”.

Bullying is not just a boy issue, but when it occurs among boys and when it is not taken seriously by schools, bullying exacerbates the “boy code”: that boys suppress their emotions and assume a mask of stoic masculinity. A seriously enforced school policy against bullying may not eliminate the behavior but it does send the message—more or less in proportion to how seriously a school enforces anti-bullying policies—that the bad feelings students experience around bullying are legitimate and the old idea that it's just “boys being boys” is not.

The Santa Fe Public Schools have started to take bullying more seriously. In September, 2003, the school board adopted a prohibition against bullying to be included in the Code of Conduct. Administrative regulations spelling out what is supposed to happen in terms of reporting, investigating, and punishing bullying incidents were adopted in October. Each school must develop its own set of procedures to implement the regulations. To this end, two psychologists specialized in the issue of bullying held a workshop for about 50 teachers, counselors and others on October 24, 2003. The purpose of the workshop was to introduce the subject more fully and share a strategy that rests on what is called “creating a caring school community” by engaging the majority of students, who are neither bullies nor victims, in helping to eliminate the problematic behavior.

Among the information shared at the workshop were gender specific bullying behaviors:

### Boys who bully tend to:

- Employ direct bullying or physical or verbal aggression
- Target victims 1 or 2 years younger who may be either boys or girls
- Identify their behaviors as bullying more often than girls

### Girls who bully tend to:

- Employ indirect means such as social aggression
- Target other girls the same age
- Bully as a group
- Involve both boys and girls in their bullying pursuits against a victim

Victor LaCerva is a Pediatrician working in Public Health, who has had a focus on violence prevention for more than fourteen years. He is the author of *Pathways to Peace*, and *Worldwords*, *Global Reflections to Awaken the Spirit*, and frequently travels across the country doing training. He can be reached via E mail: [VictorL@doh.state.nm.us](mailto:VictorL@doh.state.nm.us)

Paul Golding, continued from page 1

his mother's addiction and Jesús' own rebellious behavior led his mother to drop him off at his father's Albuquerque house with a note of introduction. The estrangement between father and son was not easily overcome in their first forced and unanticipated meeting. This experience is reflected in one of the motifs of Jesús' story and that of many boys and young men today: the absence of healthy male role models. His father, when he was there, was often drunk. Others who might have provided a better path for him to follow, like his uncles, instead were proud to see him breaking the law and fighting. Jesús says of the years following this introduction to his parents' addictions: "I was in a lot of pain, pain of abandonment and rejection by society. I thought the system was always against me. It was always them and not me."

Eventually these escapes from efforts to discipline him and from various layers of the juvenile justice system resulted in a pregnancy and a daughter. He was 19 and in Springer for the second time when, Jesús recalls with barely controlled emotion, he had the first encounter with his two week old daughter: "She gave me a reason for living, for being good and getting out."

Unfortunately, neither the mother nor Jesús was able to care for their daughter. They were each found unfit for parenthood by the State, and the girl was given up for adoption. But, the experience of parenthood, however fleeting, of the legal fight to retain his parental rights, and the parenting classes where he encountered the NM Young Fathers Project (YFP) and also met his future wife and mother of his three sons, were powerful for Jesús. The struggle around his daughter was not, however, the final loss of his life. First came another child with his future wife, and, since he had not yet hit absolute bottom—another relapse and return to jail. With the advice of a counselor from the Young Fathers Project, a good adult drug court that understood him and provided frequent testing and counseling, and with the support of his wife, Jesús was finally able to pull himself together.

One of the important steps along the way to recovery was the help of the NM Young Fathers Project. Impressed by his openness, honesty and the relevance of his experience, the then Community Coordinator for Santa Fe offered Jesús a job as his

assistant. Over the next year he learned how to counsel people who were in his situation. Still pained by the loss of his daughter, Jesús became aware of what he would have been able to do had he known his legal rights. He also learned about other support that might have made a big difference for him in relation to his daughter, for example, having someone to talk to, someone who had been where he has.

It is the role of Jesús and the YFP to work with young fathers in the unique situation each father finds himself. The young father might be unmotivated or unable to accept fatherhood because of institutionalization or anger or he might be motivated, but find that others (e.g. the mother's family or the mother herself) do not want him involved. Or he might be a teenager who wants to take up the responsibilities of fatherhood and does have support from the mother's family and his own, but simply needs help being a father and working out a parenting plan.

Jesús and the staff of the New Mexico Young Fathers Project approach their task primarily interested in the welfare of children; they believe that having two responsible parents involved in an infant's life is the best situation. Usually, a young father comes to the YFP in the first year or two of the child's life and this triggers YFP to assess the young parent's needs. Does the mother, for example, have good reason for not letting the father near his child? Is he an addict, unemployed and unable to provide support, or is he just plain unreliable? Is the mother acting out of her dislike of the young man in preventing him from sharing in the care for their child? Or are they simply in need of a mediator to help them with a parenting plan? In this process, Jesús may be required to explain what it means to be a responsible parent. It may involve confronting the would-be father with the truth of his addictions, the need to find a stable job, pay child support, settle down, and make partying a lower priority. Jesús may start by finding a counselor or a parenting class for his client. Or Jesús might help him pursue his rights in the complex of the court system where sometimes a young man may be presumed to be guilty and irresponsible by some of the social workers, attorneys and courts. Or he might be able to convince the parents to agree to a mutually acceptable plan without involving the courts.

One example Jesús offers is of a young

immigrant who left Santa Fe and returned when his daughter was 2. He wanted to get back into his child's life but was unaware of how to go about it, and was prevented by the mother from amicably working out a parenting plan. The YFP helped him file for paternity rights and made sure he paid his child support. They advised him through the court mediation process, got him into parenting classes and coached him on a court ordered parenting plan. The mother, though uncooperative, eventually was forced to allow visitation. Subsequently, the courts came to realize that she was not being a responsible parent and so gave primary custody to the father, who, knowing the value of having two parents in a child's life, now encourages visits from the mother.

Talking to Jesús about his work, one feels that each young father affords him an opportunity to heal old wounds and above all to provide some fathering for someone who, like himself, had little. During one of our meetings, Jesús mentioned how harshly he had reacted when one of his sons got under his skin recently, how he threatened to leave the boy if he did not behave. In that moment, Jesús recalled, he caught himself in the re-creation of the nightmare of his own experience, and promised the boy that he would never, ever leave him. Thus, in spite of his own growth around parental abandonment and his openness to its destructive effects, Jesús still confronts the demons of his past. In the process he becomes a more powerful father figure to many, but most importantly Jesús works hard to break the cycle of abuse and neglect that he has inherited, both in his own life and in the lives of the other young fathers he mentors.

**Please Inform Us of Events.** If you would like to publicize an event of interest specifically to boys and young men and to mentors, friends and families of boys, please send us the information at [santafeboys@comcast.net](mailto:santafeboys@comcast.net).

**We Welcome Your Input.** If you would like to contribute an article or a comment on the subjects raised here or other subjects related to boys in our community, please contact us at the address above.

*Items to be posted in the Spring issue should be received no later than March 15, 2004.*

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## Advice to Dads, Mentors and Friends

### How to Relate to Sons and Friends Who are Boys

**1. It's who he is, not what he does**

Rather than frowning if he isn't living up to your ideas about success, whether in academics or sports or standing up to bullies, focus on what your son or the boy you mentor does that makes him special--his sense of humor, smile, generosity or whatever it might be. As perhaps the most important male role model in the life of the boy or young man, the more encouragement you give, the better he will feel about himself.

**2. Develop your own style**

The important thing is to spend time together. Figure out what actually works for both of you and do it, do it, do it. Ultimately it's not the activity that is important, but being together and fulfilling the desire for connection that both of you need.

**3. Do not be the policeman**

Try not to take on the disciplining all by yourself. If you are a dad, share it with his mom. If you are a mentor, figure out what behavior is out of bounds for what you do, and work on that not happening. Don't take on more than you have to. Be a caretaker, a playmate and a teacher, more than a disciplinarian.

**4. Show rather than tell**

Be sure to make the learning process one that consists of providing a model of the behavior you think is important. If you want him to do his homework and not spend a lot of time in front of the TV, read a book near him while he works. If you want him to show respect to his mother and sister, you must show respect to women as well.

**5. Be aware of your own "father longing"**

Be aware of the pain and confusion you may have experienced from the treatment you possibly received from your own father. A shame-based upbringing may color the way you relate to your son or the boy you mentor. If you can relate differently than your father did to you, you can help break the gender straitjacket that many men are in and pass on.

**6. Real men show emotions**

Show your full range of emotions. Let him know that you can be lonely, vulnerable and afraid. Let him see that you can cry and that being a man involves more than expressing anger.

(Adapted from William Pollack, *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*. 1998, New York, N.Y. Henry Holt and Co. pp. 139-144.)