

What's Up with Manhood?

By Erica M. Hayden

Toxic masculinity: many of us hear or use that phrase now and then- but what does it mean? According to the Oxford Languages dictionary, it is “a set of attitudes and ways of behaving stereotypically associated with or expected of men, regarded as having a negative impact on men and on society as a whole.”

Options 4 Youth is a non-profit organization running for over twenty years. The organization works with disadvantaged youth, specifically young mothers (teen moms) and boys. Their program “What’s Up with Manhood?” was formed eight years ago and assists boys (grades 9-12) with social and academic support. After Mayor Rahm Emanuel implemented the What’s Up with Manhood? Program through a mental program from the Department of family services, Mayor Lori Lightfoot came into office. After that, the program lost all of its funding.

“We kept it going on a shoestring- with tape! A lot of duct tape, a lot of funding: y’know, a little bit here, a little bit there. It was a struggle, because you have two staff members at the time- we feed them during lunch; we bring food from outside so we can have group- but we did it and got funding from CEJA.” Luciano Medellin, 53, Director of Male Programs, runs What’s Up with Manhood? Program.

Toxic masculinity has grown over the years with the advancement of social media influencers: Andrew Tate, for example. Influencing young boys- “Andrew Tate says women belong in the home, can’t drive, and are a man’s property.” According to *The Guardian*. With the display of Tate and his views and belief of women, young boys are turning to Tate as inspiration on what a “real man” is and how they should treat women.

“Toxic masculinity is to feel superior than another person whether it’s a male or female- they feel like they have control over another person, like a bully, and it’s kind of normalized. It’s just something that- even me, as a student growing up in Little Village High School- when we look like we have power: we have respect.” Antonio Saucedo, 19, mentor at What’s Up with Manhood? Program.

The program offers young boys opportunities and growth: to take a step back and help them become the men they want to be. Such as doing group exercises that consist of the boys naming words that they think correlate when hearing the phrase: manhood. Going on to call terms such as strength, alpha, protector, et cetera. While mentors like Saucedo will throw in words they think of, such as sympathetic, empathetic, and respectful. Thus, discussing how these words are better suited- turning toxic masculinity, into healthy masculinity.

“We offer different perspective, all in all. Like- these kids are used to something at home, in Little Village, in the community. Their whole culture is based on what they see at home, whereas- this program derives from that. Tries to give them a different perspective- Little Village is not going to be your whole life as a reference to what your life might be.” Jahir Ruiz, 19, mentor at What’s Up with Manhood? Program.

This program has helped many young high school boys since 2017- the program has prevented any interaction with the criminal justice system and reduced gang violence. Increase graduation rates and high school retention. While also increasing post-secondary education acceptance rates. Before they were mentors, Ruiz and Saucedo were once members of the program in high school. They have since pursued higher education while being hired as mentors for the program with Medellin.

“The world does not start and stop at Little Village. You have to look beyond that and experience other things, and other stuff. With that, is the understanding that what you think is normal- but there’s more in the world.” Said Medellin.