IMPACT CASE STUDY

Men Can Stop Rape’s Impact Supporting the Establishment of Men of Strength Clubs in Colorado

Interview with Sarah Dobson, Prevention Specialist, Moving to End Sexual Assault (MESA), Lafayette, Colorado, and Niko Youngren, Math Teacher, Basketball Coach, and Men of Strength Club Facilitator, Fairview High School, Boulder, Colorado

Before Working with Men Can Stop Rape

Moving to End Sexual Assault (MESA) has served the Boulder, Colorado community since 1972, providing support and services to all survivors of sexual assault and implementing prevention programming. Their prevention programs focus on shifting the culture that condones, normalizes and excuses sexual assault to one that is safe and free of all forms of sexual violence. They deliver programs of education, prevention, and bystander intervention in county schools, local agencies, and businesses to increase awareness and reduce the occurrence of sexual assault. Before working with Men Can Stop Rape (MCSR), MESA had a program called Men Standing Up, which Ms. Dobson described as a “volunteer program of male-identified adults engaging in primary prevention programming with the person coordinating prevention programs,” but the organization “didn’t have any robust continuing [engaging men] program going. We were doing workshops for different middle, high school, college kids, [and] businesses at request.”

How Men Can Stop Rape Supported MESA

Men Can Stop Rape supported MESA in starting high school Men of Strength (MOST) Clubs. A MOST Club, which typically has 15 students, provides middle, high school, and college age males with a regularly structured and supportive space to learn about healthy masculinity and translate learning into community leadership. Rather than using its own staff to facilitate MOST Clubs, MESA reached out to various Boulder County high schools to invite them to participate in the MOST Club training. This two-day training prepares facilitators to understand the theoretical frameworks central to the 24-session MOST Club curriculum, especially dominant and counter stories of masculinity as they relate to unhealthy and healthy masculinity, and to facilitate the essential curriculum sessions.

MCSR conducted two MOST Club trainings approximately a year apart, and two of the participants – Niko Youngren, a math teacher and basketball coach at Fairview High School, and Kenny Gillis, a math/engineering teacher at Boulder Preparatory High School – started facilitating MOST Clubs at their respective schools. Fairview High
School, located in Boulder, is a public high school with more than 2,000 students, the majority of whom are Caucasian and come from affluent families. According to Ms. Dobson, Fairview “had a uniquely passionate principal on this issue [sexual assault]” who had requested MESA work with the school’s athletes and coaches, and when MOST Club was offered as a possibility, the school was “excited about that.” Athletes were identified as having “strong social influence in the school culture,” and the MOST Club members have all been athletes. Boulder Preparatory High School, a charter school, was founded by five juvenile justice professionals as a way to help the large percentage of youth entering the juvenile justice system who did not have viable educational plans. The school has less than 150 students. Since the training, MCSR has provided Club facilitators with regular technical assistance, troubleshooting issues and generally offering support through phone calls. The MOST Club logo and T-shirt design were provided by MCSR to MESA for the two MOST Clubs. MESA also supports the Clubs in various ways – providing funding for snacks, for example – and connects the facilitators with MCSR.

**How Fairview High School has Used Men Can Stop Rape’s Support**

The Fairview MOST Club was initiated by Mr. Youngren’s office mate, who had gone through the first Club training, although meetings were inconsistent. Mr. Youngren, upon learning about the MOST Club, expressed a strong interest in playing a role in the Club and went through a second MOST Club training, which he described as “by far the best professional development that I’ve had. It helped me not only in MOST Club but in my classroom as well.” He began facilitating the Fairview Club in January 2018, holding meetings for student athletes – primarily football players – at the end of the school day during a period devoted to the athletic programs. Attendance was high because at that point football season had ended. Since the start of the 2019-2020 school year, attendance has been more sporadic during the football season. Mr. Youngren assumes that attendance will go up after the season since the football players continue to express a desire to be part of the Club. One of the values of the Club in Mr. Youngren’s view, is that it “creates a platform to have hard conversations that we don’t have in really any other place.” He thought that the members especially appreciated meetings with check-ins and exercises that focused on dominant and counter stories of masculinity.

Now that he has returning members who have been through the MOST Club curriculum, Mr. Youngren expressed a desire to expand the influence of the Club: “We’ve had a lot of really good conversations and made a change within ourselves, but now let’s find a way to get our message and our goals to be known to the rest of the school community.” After a phone call with MCSR discussing possible Community Strength Projects (CSPs), Mr. Youngren took the ideas to the members for discussion. The goal of CSPs is to translate curriculum lessons into public action and peer education. Under the guidance of adult facilitators, Club members develop, execute, and evaluate their own projects as a Club. Currently, with the guidance of Mr. Youngren, the Fairview Club is
considering three CSPs. The first would be to develop a Club slogan or motto that is relevant to the Fairview community and can be shared over social media. Another would be for some of the current members to conduct MOST Club curriculum exercises with male student athletes who are not part of the Club. The final would be to hold an open meeting focusing on a relevant discussion topic and invite female students.

Impact of Men Can Stop Rape’s Support in Colorado

Respective of their positions in relation to the Fairview MOST Club, Ms. Dobson and Mr. Youngren identified different signs of success. Ms. Dobson identified impact at the level of the school community. Because there are so many “competing demands on teachers, and even more on coaches,” she viewed the Club continuing to be a priority for the school administration and continuing from year to year as indicators of success. She also considered the school’s willingness to train multiple people to facilitate the MOST Club as another valuable indicator. Finally, she viewed members returning for a second year of the Club as conveying the meaningfulness of the MOST Club to them.

Mr. Youngren tended to identify impact at the level of the individual. For example, he indicated that some of the members intervened to challenge disrespectful behavior, such as when someone “inappropriately touched a girl” or referred to women in inappropriate ways. One Club member said that the MOST Club helped him talk to his sister. A parent revealed to Mr. Youngren that her son, a Club member, was writing about the value of MOST Club in his college applications. In surveys at the end of the Club’s first year, there were significant increases in the number of members responding positively to “I feel like men and women are equal in a family,” and “If I get angry, I feel like I know how to make myself calm before hurting myself or anyone else.” There was a significant decrease in the number of members who responded positively to “I feel I have to show I am a ‘real man’ to earn respect from my peers.”