

Program 12

Men Need a Project

Recovering some youth, health and meaning through mentoring

In this, the final of this 12-part radio and internet project, the emphasis is on the importance of ongoing involvement in projects for retired men – a continuity and synergy of those essential elements that gave purpose and meaning to our lives. As well, we revisit a traditional role of older men, that of mentoring and the passing of on important life skills to younger men; in this day and age when many boys grow up without a strong father figure, this mentoring role is even more important than ever. The program ends with an interview with the South Australian Government Minister for Ageing, the Honourable Zoe Bettison MP; the interview looks at the challenges faced by men who go through redundancy or an inability to continue to work because of physical limitations or disability.

Interviewees

Dr John Ashfield

The Honourable Zoe Bettison MP

Dr Anthony Brown

Professor Barry Golding

Dr Miles Groth

Discussion Starter

Men are renowned for their assiduous focus on and often extraordinary perseverance with projects, whether it is building a corporation, restoring a car, engaging in a daring adventure, or creating yet another extension to their house or garden.

One of the biggest challenges of retirement for men is to avoid falling into an unplanned void, where insufficient occupation and stimulation can start the quick march towards a quite unnecessary mental and physical decline. Retirement needs to be planned well ahead of time. To think that leisure will suffice once one is 'shot of work', has been found by many ageing males to be a big mistake; only subsequently realising that their sense of being meaningfully engaged with the world is too diminished and that they need to be 'employed'; they need a project.

Health professionals have been slow to realise that most men have little interest in adopting a healthy lifestyle just for the sake of it. But bring men's appetite for projects into the equation, and you can often get them to change their lifestyle and attend to their health, as a means of being more assured that nothing will get in the way of them pursuing unfettered, their latest creative pursuit.

A rarely considered role and social project that can provide much meaning and satisfaction for older men, is that of mentoring younger men. Mentoring in most indigenous societies was conducted by a mature male family member – other than father. It was about assisting young males to make the transition from boyhood to manhood, and harnessing the hormonal and physical energies of youth in a way that served to benefit human community, rather than acting upon it in a destructive way.

Most young males these days don't have anyone to mentor them through this difficult transition, and are launched often from childhood dependence into adult responsibility and autonomy without any real assistance. Many young males, understandably, become confused, angry, and feel isolated and directionless. Is it any wonder they act-out sometimes in reckless ways.

The role of mentor can challenge older males to consolidate and clarify their own values, to adopt a more generous engagement with young people, and to give back to the community in a way that only men can do. Being meaningful, satisfying and focussed on

the young, mentoring can install men back into their own youthfulness, adventurousness and zeal for living – a reward that few other projects can fully match.

Especially as older males, we are probably keenly aware that the more you know the more you realise what you don't know. But what we are rich in is experience. We know of the contradictions of life, its hard lessons, and how nothing is actually black and white. We know that when we see any form of human excess, lashing out, angry protest, or self-absorption, it is familiar, because it has found expression in our own history. But rather than crush us it impelled us to grow, learn and advance for our own betterment and that of others.

If we dig deep as men, we can find a lot of compassion and generosity for the young; and if we refresh our memory of our own youth, we can often bring a surprising empathy to our engagement with them as well. Now that is a worthwhile project.

Questions

- 1. What might be some avenues for older males getting involved in a mentoring role?*
- 2. What are some of the obstacles to older males taking on this role in the community?*
- 3. Why is it that we put so much emphasis on good childrearing, and yet almost completely neglect the need of young males to be supported to make the transition to manhood?*

Project Consultant

Dr John Ashfield