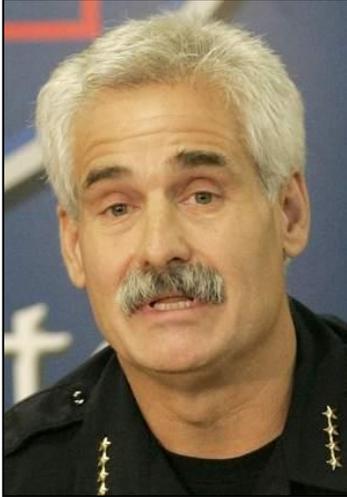


Voices of Men takes aim at domestic abuse

Written by Ariel Cheung Post-Crescent Media

Jun. 4, 2014 |

postcrescent.com



Voices of Men annual breakfast

When: 7:15 to 9 a.m. Tuesday

Where: Radisson Paper Valley Hotel, 333 W. College Ave., Appleton

Cost: \$10 per plate for adults, free for high school and college students

To attend: Register online at bit.ly/VOMbreakfast. Tickets also can be purchased at the door.

APPLETON —There is a box.

It's constructed of magazine ads, pages of comic books, video game boxes and toys. It's reinforced by generation after generation defining manhood as stoic strength and femininity as delicate weakness.

This box dictates how men should behave and how they should treat women. Every day, well-meaning men stand inside it and watch silently as others commit acts of violence.

It's called the man box, and Voices of Men invites you to step out of it.

"This isn't something we can just bury our heads in the sand and ignore until someone close to us is assaulted or abused," said Shannon Kenevan, president of Voices of Men. "Men don't need to wait until it becomes that profound; they should care about any woman getting abused."

Voices of Men began in 2007 when four organizations in the Fox Valley —Christine Ann Domestic Abuse Services, Harbor House Domestic Abuse Services, Reach Counseling Services and the Sexual Assault Crisis Center —hosted a summit to get men involved in ending sexual assault and domestic violence against women and children.

With funding from ThedaCare's Community Health Action Team, the men who attended the summit formed Voices of Men, a grassroots organization dedicated to changing long-held cultural beliefs about gender roles and convincing well-meaning men to take a stand against domestic violence and sexual assault.

"We know most of the perpetrators of violence against women are men, but most men aren't the perpetrators," said Beth Schnorr, executive director of Harbor House. "Most men are the good guys, but they're silent, and that silence lets the perpetrators continue."

On June 10, Voices of Men will host its fifth annual breakfast at the Radisson Paper Valley Hotel. It will feature educational programs on changing male perspectives on sexism, masculinity and prevention efforts.

"We have to ask ourselves if 90 percent or more of the perpetrators are men, why are we as a society raising men to commit violence? What are we doing wrong that's allowing this to happen?" Kenevan said. "Ultimately, perpetrators are responsible for their own behavior. That said, we've all created a society that allows it to exist."

Since the Fox Valley group hosted its first breakfast, attendance has doubled, and leaders hope to see at least 700 people attend this year. The breakfast is the main source of funding for Voices of Men, which organizes advocacy events and education sessions for churches, school groups and sport teams throughout the year.

Voices of Men members include prominent Fox Valley leaders, including ThedaCare CEO Dean Gruner, United Way Fox Cities President Peter Kelly and Appleton Police Chief Pete Helein.

“Domestic violence is not one of those problems law enforcement can arrest its way out of,” said Helein, who has previously stated that it is one of the department’s top priorities. “We can’t arrest enough people to change the behavior. When people speak out in front of others, that is an incredible, positive way to change behaviors. Sadly for too many men, we remain silent.”

Gender-based violence programs, such as Voices of Men, tend to work best when they seek to transform gender roles and expectations, according to a 2007 World Health Organization study. Such programs can effectively change behaviors and attitudes related to many gender-based issues, including domestic violence, sexual health and interaction with children, the study found.

Outagamie County had 788 reports of domestic abuse in 2012, while Winnebago County had 737 incidents, the Wisconsin Department of Justice reported this month. That amounts to an average of two incidents per day, with 92 percent of the cases resulting in an arrest. Nearly half the victims were 18 to 29 years old, further stressing the need to get the message out to students.

Voices of Men has seen encouraging results from its outreach to high school sport teams, organizers said. Four years ago, the Appleton East High School football team showed up to the breakfast in uniform. They’ve come back every year since.

“When I was in high school, this wasn’t on my radar,” Kenevan said. “It’s summer vacation and we’ve got high school football players asking their coaches to come back next year. It speaks volumes.”

After attending last year’s breakfast, members of one team spoke up when a coach made a sexist remark during practice, Schnorr said.

“That’s a huge change,” she said. “And there’s more of this happening than what we know of in these small ways, but that’s really what it takes.”

The goal is to change the culture and shift societal perception of women as second-class citizens who deserve less respect than men.

“There’s something wrong when we have a society that allows even one man to become a perpetrator, and it’s an epidemic,” Kenevan said. “How are we excusing or creating a climate where men feel they are entitled to get sex with a woman or child, where men feel women are of less value than them? That’s on all of us.”

To some extent, people might not even realize the sexist messages they’re promoting or accepting, Kenevan said.

“Look at how many commercials you see during the Super Bowl for beer or food where you’re going to see women scantily clad,” he said. “We don’t scratch our heads and say, ‘What does selling a hamburger have to do with a woman in a bikini?’ That really sends those subconscious messages that women are less than, they’re objects and they’re there for men’s pleasures.”

—Ariel Cheung: 920-993-1000, ext. 430, or acheung@postcrescent.com; on Twitter @arielfab