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RACE/ETHNICITY

Real Men: Urban Teens Write About How to Be a Man

Youth Communication
226 pages.

In 35 autobiographical stories and articles, 26 urban males ages 14 to 24 explore what manhood means. As participants in Youth Communication's writing program in New York City, they are guided by editors through many drafts until their views are clearly expressed.

The first part, "Who We Are," starts with a chapter about "people who shape us." Not one of its six authors lives with his father. Their refrain echoes throughout the book: It's an enormous challenge to become a well-adjusted man without a role model. Although Troy Shawn Welcome admired his "playboy" father as a child in Guyana, they rarely met after moving to America when Troy was 9. At 17, worried about being "good enough to be considered a man," Welcome phoned his father to discuss the years without contact. His father's responses made it clear that "he didn't want me." At 19, Welcome wrote "My Father: I Want to Be Everything He's Not"

A chapter about places contains "Following the Leader," in which an anonymous young resident of Brownsville, Brooklyn, interviews experts to discover "Why are so many of us living in rundown apartments, cooped up in projects, depending on welfare, stashed

up in prison, and stuck in segregated communities?"

Stories in a chapter about self-definition challenge stereotypes. In "Color Me Different," Jamal Greene, 16, one of the few blacks in his school, questions why he is expected to speak in slang, listen to rap or reggae. excel in basketball, and dance well "I feel distanced from blacks because I am black but don't act the part. and I feel distanced from whites because I act white but don't look the part," says Greene, who later graduated from Harvard and became a law school professor. In

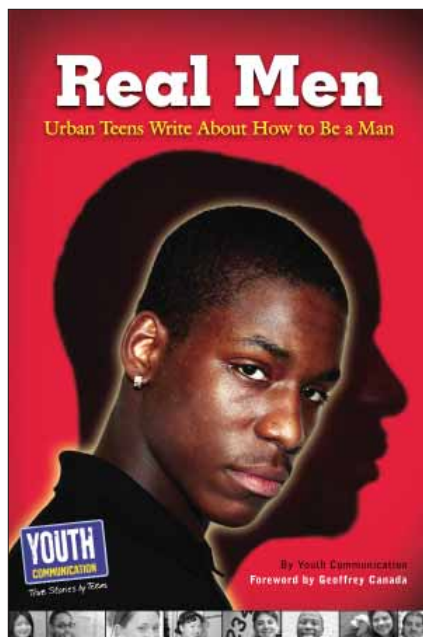
"Getting Ghetto." Fred Wagenhouser, 21, echoes similar feelings as a "white kid" from a mixed family living in the projects and accused of being a "wigger," a white person trying to be black. In "I'm Not What You Expect Me to Be," third-generation Chinese-American Jordan Yue, 17, rejects the studious "model minority" role.

The book's second half focuses on ingredients for a successful future. Stories in a chapter about handling difficult feelings explore addictions, depression, fighting and therapy. An education chapter examines a learning disability, distractions from study, and the difference between college and high school. A chapter about money

includes an article with job-search tips, accounts from young men who enjoy their work, and a cautionary tale about credit cards.

Concluding stories feature ways of finding connections. The last two pieces speak eloquently about fatherhood:

In "Some POPS Are Hanging In," Antwaun Garcia, 21, investigates Providing Opportunities for Parental



Success (POPS), a parenting workshop run by ex-convict Robert Sanchez. POPS seeks to make a dent in US. Census Bureau statistics showing that “more than half of all black children don’t live with their fathers,” along with one in three Hispanic children and one in four white children. Research shows that children without dads are “much more likely to be poor, depressed, fail school, commit crimes, have sex early” reports Garcia. Sanchez teaches fathers to be “a guiding light, a teacher, a friend, a protector, an enlightener, a supporter.”

“Becoming a Father” by Michael Orr, 21, exemplifies those qualities. When Orr’s girlfriend Erica became pregnant, Orr did online research about parenting and took prenatal classes. He finds it “a joy” to watch baby Emma grow. When his own father visits Emma, “he rocks her in such a lovely way,” says Orr, “it braces my spirits to see them bonding together.”

Too many of these young writers cope with fractured

families, poverty, drugs, crime, street “crews,” substandard education, prejudice and limited employment opportunities. The percentage of those without fathers reflects U.S. Census figures. Ten of these 26 spent time in foster care. As the act of writing helps them find their way, readers reap the benefit of their insights.

This anthology of stories—originally published in the magazines *New Youth Connections*, *Represent* and *Rise* between 1994 and 2010—is connected to a Leader’s Guide and DVD (see the next item) in Youth Communication’s Real Stories Program, helping young people develop the skills to lead successful lives.

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