

# 'It's Men Fixing Men'

*Veteran volunteer leads support group aimed at overcoming domestic violence*

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A spider changed RobRoy MacLeod's life. A brown recluse spider crawled up his wife's coat sleeve and bit her arm in January 1986. Three days later she was dead.

Without warning, the time he thought he'd have to make up for years of treating her "like an employee, part of my staff" was gone.

"There were so many things that happened in our 25-year relationship that I couldn't rectify," MacLeod said. "I felt ashamed and guilty and, of course, sad."

A friend told him about about a men's support group, and the proud, "ego-driven" general manager for a construction company was distraught enough to show up to a meeting, he said.

Nearly 25 years later, MacLeod, now 77 and a father of three, grandfather of five and great-grandfather to one, is part of a corps of long-timers with Men Evolving Non-violently, or MEN, a support group for men.

"Men are so caught up in the misbeliefs in their roles," MacLeod said.

Men should be the providers, the handymen and the stoic, or so MacLeod thought until he began attending the weekly group. The problem with that? If dinner's not on time, "the resentment builds," he said.

MacLeod is an elder statesman in a group of about 25 volunteers who lead MEN groups. Groups are anonymous and meet in Santa Rosa and Petaluma.

Core belief No. 1: Violent behavior can be unlearned. No. 2: Men must help stop domestic violence.

“Violence means emotional violence, sexual violence, economic violence,” MacLeod said. “People think they don’t have a problem because, ‘I’ve never struck my wife.’ “

Jon Warren was leading a group in 1986 when MacLeod showed up. Warren, 56, a general contractor in Petaluma, said MacLeod was the third person to go straight from the beginners group to training facilitators.

“Having a guy who was so willing to admit to his stuff, to his part, it was refreshing,” Warren said. “Part of the magic that happens is when the guys start working on each other and start calling each other on their crap. RobRoy was a natural from the start.”

MacLeod leads meetings twice a week with men ranging in age from 20 to 60. One group is for newcomers and it focuses on learning to talk, listen and ask for what they want.

The other group is for men who have completed the beginners group and want to attack more complex communication and relationship skills. “It’s men fixing men,” MacLeod said.

For a week every other month, MacLeod is glued to the group’s cell phone to answer calls to their 24-hour crisis hot line.

“Calling is the hardest thing in the world,” MacLeod said. “I have an enormous admiration for men who do it,” MacLeod said.

Feeling brave? Call MEN’s 24-hour hot line at 528-2636.

Calls to the hot line vary in frequency. The phone can ring every three days or every ten minutes. “I learned my lesson: Don’t pour concrete when you’re in charge of the hot line,” he said.

On a recent night, MacLeod and the others talked a father through the grief and guilt of giving his children to a friend to care for after he lost his job.

“He can deal with the hardship of sleeping on the street or in a shelter and the children are in a safe place,” MacLeod said.

Teaching men to talk about violent behavior, resentment and how to nurture themselves can keep fathers from passing violent behaviors to their sons, he said.

Can a violent man really change his ways? “Absolutely,” MacLeod said. “It doesn’t matter if you’re violent or not, what matters is the willingness of people to work through how we solve problems.”

In 2003, MacLeod’s perspective shifted when a doctor diagnosed him with chronic lymphocytic leukemia and gave him 2½ years to live. Seven years later he feels healthy, all things considered, he said, though he’s going through another round of chemotherapy.

He’s giving away photos -- shedding material weight, he says -- and getting ready for whatever’s next. “I really think the MEN’s work, that will be my statement,” MacLeod said.

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