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Restoring dignity to the battered campus male

On September 27, a speaker gave a talk at the University of Toronto without the need for police protection. Considering his topic, that's good news.

By BARBARA KAY

Beginning in January 2012, the Canadian Association for Equality (CAFÉ), in conjunction with the University of Toronto's Men's Issues Awareness Society, has organized a diverse series of lectures that focus on men's issues – family-court bias against dads, male-blaming in Women's Studies courses, prostate cancer – all of them responsibly addressed, even those that critiqued feminist ideology.

After the first few talks, organized resistance gathered. Before long, attempts to disrupt and scuttle every subsequent event became downright ugly: the ringing of fire bells, barricading entrances, inflamed harassment of attendees and shouting down speakers in the lecture hall.

Last Friday, however, a scheduled CAFÉ-sponsored, male-positive event, entitled “Caring about University Men: Why we need campus men's centers in a time of crisis,” proceeded without incident. Perhaps this means we've turned a corner in the gender wars. I hope so.

The speaker was Wagner College psychology professor Miles Groth, author of *Engaging College Men: Discovering what works and why*. Having founded his own college's men's centre four years ago, Groth has emerged as the acknowledged godfather of the controversial men's centre movement that has been roiling many campuses. In March, Ryerson University's student union blocked the creation of a men's issues club, and, last May, students at Simon Fraser University in B.C. tried to block a new men's centre. The general message emanating from feminism-dominated student unions is that any officially recognized voice for men is by definition a gesture of misogyny.

In his talk, Groth firmly dispelled any such notions. Men's centres, he affirmed, are “not against anything.” Then he elaborated on why there is a need for them.

While there are 400 Women's Studies departments in the U.S. and 45 in Canada, there are no Men's Studies programs in Canada and only one in the U.S. (apart from those that are subsidiaries of Gender Studies and taught from a feminist perspective). Women's and Gender Studies are de facto women's centres. But there are only nine men's centres in the world – eight in the U.S., one in the U.K., with a few struggling to gain purchase in Canada.

Groth explained why they are necessary. In 1960 the ratio of male-to-female attendance was two to one. In 1980 parity was achieved. Today we are looking at a reversal of the 1960 ratio, with the international rate of male enrolment in college in developed countries approaching 35%. Most post-graduate students are female, up to seven out of 10 in some disciplines.

Parity for women was achieved because society recognized academia's gender inequality and actively promoted higher education for women. But today, even though university admissions are well aware of the disparity, few seem to recognize the decline in men on campus as a problem, let alone the social crisis Groth believes it is becoming.

One of the issues that a men's centre would address is the general passivity of male students. Groth noted that women students are far more likely to be engaged in extra-curricular activities than men. Others include: the rising incidence of young male suicide, already four times that of women, over the last 15 years; the issue of male power, much bruted by feminists, but in reality true only of a thin top echelon of men, with most men being quite powerless over their lives, far less powerful than many educated women; the effects of fatherlessness and emerging trends in fatherhood; plus male-specific health and sexual issues.

Most important, men need reinforcement for self-respect in an environment where male virtues are ignored, but male vices are publicly and frequently denounced. Campus males are lectured to about rape culture, made to wear white ribbons to commemorate the Montreal Massacre, and in general projected as creatures of menace and potential violence rather than the trustworthy comrades most of them are. To counter this trend, Groth asserted that "a perspective on being male must be provided that contrasts with that which nearly all universities now provide. An audible and visible *male-positive* presence must be foregrounded."

Groth's ambition is "to see a men's center on every campus of every college and university in Canada and the States." Whether or not that happens, the fact that he could say so in an atmosphere of civility, without a protester repetitively screaming "Shut the fuck up" to attendees (as happened at a previous talk) is welcome progress in the restoration of dignity to the battered campus male.