

**They're footballers.
Fraternity men.
Big, burly guys
like ex-quarterback
Don McPherson,
who's hoping to lead
a new generation
of men into a
violence-free
end zone.**

By Kristin Ohlson

Photograph by Bill Hayward

SEVERAL NEW YORK DRAGONS FOOTBALL players limp into the room with what Don McPherson calls the midseason walk, meaning they have weeks of scrapes and bruises that haven't yet had a chance to heal. They reach out to shake Don's hand and the contrast is dramatic. The Dragons—members of a professional arena (indoor) football team—have their injuries, their baggy clothes, and their faint hopes for a future in the National Football League. The 37-year-old Don has already had his dash in the NFL, his injuries have long since healed, and his crisp khaki pants, lapis-blue shirt, and easy smile make him look like a corporate executive on retreat. Still, Don will be mining the similarities between himself and these men in his presentation—not just their shared experience in football but also their shared history as men in a country where sexual violence runs rampant. A country in which, experts estimate, a woman is battered by a man—usually an

Don nods. “Jack is out of the picture and Jill is stigmatized. That shows that even our language about sexual violence blames women for the things that men do.”

The Dragons pay rapt attention for the next two hours, not only because this is a startling concept but because Don cuts a heroic figure. As a quarterback at Syracuse University, he was first in the NCAA in passing and led Syracuse to an undefeated season in 1987. He won more than 18 national collegiate-player-of-the-year honors, then played for the Philadelphia Eagles and Houston Oilers before retiring in 1994.

This kind of career isn't just a dream for arena football players, of course—many men have such dreams and idolize the men who achieve them. Whenever Don would return to his hometown during his football years, old acquaintances were quick to cluster around him. “You still playing football?” they'd crow. “You the man!” But it's in the eight years since he left football that Don has emerged as

men like Don McPherson join the fray. “Daily violence is a part of our culture—school shootings, the Oklahoma City bombing,” Don tells the Dragons. “Does it ever occur to any of us that girls are doing it? No. What about rape, sexual assault, harassment, date rape, domestic violence—if we call these things women's issues, what does that allow men to do? That's right, take no responsibility for it. We are the perpetrators.” In the process of challenging other men to take responsibility for male behavior, male activists like Don are taking on the whole structure of sexism—gender prejudice plus power—that encourages such crimes. Many even call themselves feminists.

“I use the f-word a lot,” says Mark Wynn, a former Nashville police lieutenant and another sexual violence missionary who educates medical, social service, and criminal justice professionals around the world about the dynamics of domestic violence. Mark can describe the

“I tell people that this work is not just about stopping men's behavior



intimate partner—every 15 seconds, raped every two minutes, and murdered by a spouse or boyfriend every six hours.

“Let's look at the semantics of sexism,” Don begins, writing on a whiteboard. The Dragons lean forward intently, as if he's a coach outlining strategy for an upcoming game. Then he stands back and reads these words aloud.

Jack beats Jill.

Jill was beaten by Jack.

Jill was beaten.

Jill is a battered woman.

“What's happened here?” Don asks, pointing his marker at the last line.

After a few seconds, one of the players speaks up. “Jack's missing?”

a real hero. He's parlayed his superstar credibility into speaking engagements with thousands of people—especially male athletes and college students—to talk about sexual violence, male privilege, and the culture that breeds them.

For some 30 years, activists—mostly women—have struggled to provide services to victims of sexual violence, pressure the criminal justice system to punish offenders, and drag sexual violence into the court of public censure. In the past few years, there's been a dazzling explosion of new energy in this movement as a small but growing number of

Manpower as seen by Men Can Stop Rape's media campaign (left). At one university, male students made handprints on sheets (right), proclaiming “These hands don't hurt.”

powerlessness felt by victims firsthand: His own mother endured years of escalating abuse but was too terrified, isolated, and ashamed to leave her abuser. “My definition of a feminist is someone who protects the rights of women, so I'm proud of this,” Mark says. “I think all of us should be feminists.”

Certainly, some men have toiled against sexual violence in the past, but their numbers have been tiny and they've been concentrated in academia or social work. This new wave of male activists is not only much bigger but their backgrounds allow them to wield a different kind of clout:

men like Don and Mark, for instance, who hail from traditional male bastions and have lived the kind of rough-and-tumble masculinity so admired by other men. When "real men" like these blast long-cherished sexually aggressive male behaviors, other men tend to take notice.

Some male activists are in the entertainment industry and use their showbiz glitter to highlight male violence: men like country rocker Andy Griggs, a national spokesperson for the Family Violence Prevention Fund, who recorded "Waitin' On Sundown," a song about a woman fleeing an abusive spouse. "You hear a lot of women talk about sexual violence, but not men. It's time for men to stand up and say, 'I will not abuse women and I will not support violence against them.'"

This surge of righteous brothers is just what Marybeth Carter, executive director of the California Coalition Against Sexual Assault (CALCASA), longed for 21 years ago as a new activist in the sexual

That's what we have to do: Behind closed doors, men have to confront other men."

Don, Mark, and other sexual violence activists don't march into a roomful of men and start accusing them—after all, most men are not violent. They point instead to the "bystander culture." This is the silent majority of men who don't object when they hear crude slurs and vicious epithets about women even when they find such language objectionable, who turn their faces away from violent behavior on the part of their peers, who don't feel this movement has anything to do with them even though their own wives, girlfriends, and daughters are afraid to go for a walk after dark. The Family Violence Prevention Fund has launched a new program called Coaching Boys into Men, which encourages fathers, coaches, and other mentors to talk about these issues with youngsters. The overall message is that it's time for the nice guys to pull away from the pack and break the silence.

Don was pulling away from the pack when, not long before he retired, he met Jackson Katz. Jackson is the cocreator of Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) at Northeastern University, a program that trains athletes to combat male violence against women. "Being one of the guys and going along with the guys is the easiest thing in the world," Jackson says. "What takes strength is to turn to your male friends and say, 'You cannot talk or act like that toward women—as a man of conscience, I'm not going to stand for it.'"

Don already knew he was headed toward a lifelong engagement with social issues. He had started just after college with Athletes Helping Athletes, which teaches high school athletes to work with younger kids on bullying and other issues involving violence. (Don is now associate director of this program as well as founder and executive director of the newly created Sports Leadership Institute, at Adelphi University *CONTINUED ON PAGE 285*)

says Don McPherson, "but about allowing us to be who we are."

violence field. "In the earliest days," says Marybeth, "women turned to men and said, 'Please help us stop this, please confront other men.' But there wasn't a willingness on their part."

"HOW MANY OF YOU HAVE A WOMAN that you care about?" Don asks the Dragons.

All but one of the players put up their hands. The lone holdout shrugs sheepishly. "I haven't met the right person."

"No mother? No sister?" Don persists, and the guy finally lifts his hand.

"There was never violence in my home," Don continues. "But I was close friends with a woman once who was very angry. I found out later on that she had been the victim of substance-abuse rape 15 years ago. She was raped by four guys."

He pauses long enough to let the Dragons shake their heads, then goes on. "This kind of thing is a men's issue because it affects the women in our lives."

Don turns suddenly and addresses a few of the black players. "It's like racism," he says. "If racism were just a black issue, we wouldn't be here. It wasn't until white people confronted other white people behind closed doors that things changed.

Good Guys

■ Casey Gwinn, San Diego city attorney, speaks to groups across the country about domestic violence, and has helped galvanize his own community around this issue. Under his leadership, domestic violence homicides have dropped 75 percent over the past 15 years. He has accomplished this through vigorous prosecution of domestic violence cases and evidence-based prosecution, in which prosecutors build a case against offenders even when victims are afraid to cooperate. "I'm a product of the women's movement," Casey says. "Three feminists invested their lives in me when I first became a prosecutor 17 years ago. They educated me about domestic violence and built a relationship that continues today."

■ Patrick Lemmon and Jonathan Stillerman are codirectors of Men Can Stop Rape, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit that works with thousands of students nationwide and runs a stunning media campaign aimed at men and boys using the slogan "My strength is not for hurting."

The group is growing rapidly because of huge demand from a wide spectrum of social service areas. "People are realizing that their work—even if not connected to sexual violence—is very much connected to traditional masculinity," says Jonathan. "There are a lot of groups working on issues like early fatherhood, HIV and AIDS, or the prevention of STDs. They realize that if we embrace traditional notions of masculinity, we're embracing a lot of risky sexual behaviors."

■ In Canada many men were shocked into action after the infamous 1989 Montreal Massacre, in which a lone gunman entered a classroom at L'Ecole Polytechnique, ordered the men to step aside, and murdered 14 female engineering students. Several men's organizations sprang into existence, including White Ribbon Campaign, which began in Toronto, and Men for Change in Halifax. "At first there was trepidation about who we were and what our agenda was," says Peter Davison, Men for Change's executive director. "When men organize, it's typically done to get power, but we were organizing to share a new vision of the world." —K.O.

BE A MAN

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 271

in Long Island.) He realized that many of the problems Athletes Helping Athletes addressed—violence, truancy, alcohol abuse—were often connected to a shaky sense of self and to a narrow view of who they thought they were supposed to be as males. When Don met Jackson, his message about the damage traditional sex roles inflict upon women clicked with Don's own dissatisfaction with the pressures and limitations of masculinity. "As a football player, I was supposed to be a tough guy, but it was never consistent with who I was inside," Don says. "I tell people that this work is not just about stopping men's behavior but about allowing us to be who we are. It's been the most freeing element in my life."

Linda Manning is a psychologist who directs the Margaret Cuningim Women's Center at Vanderbilt University and has spent years counseling female students traumatized by rape and relationship violence. Now she and colleague Sandra Harrell are engaged in what Marybeth Carter calls the hottest trend in college campaigns against sexual violence: They are reaching out to young men.

One of their most promising initiatives is Men Promoting a Solution (MPAS), a group of male students who, one by one, approached the center with a desire to make a difference. In the beginning, >

some of their ideas had the unintentional effect of bolstering traditional sex roles, albeit with a benevolent posture. One notion was to arm all incoming women students with pagers. If a woman encountered trouble, MPAS would gallop to the rescue.

"I empathized with that feeling of wanting to protect those who are disadvantaged," says Sandra, coordinator of outreach and services for Project Safe, a campuswide sexual violence prevention program funded by a grant from the Department of Justice's Violence Against Women Office. (Vanderbilt is one of 47 campuses nationwide to receive such a grant.) "When you first realize that oppression and discrimination exist, you want to use your privilege to help. So I told them their enthusiasm was wonderful but that we should harness it in a way that empowers everyone, not just the men."

"The pagers were a classic example of patriarchal thinking," adds Linda Manning, "men using their power to take care of you, not to oppress you, but they're still in power. The feminist approach challenges the idea that men have to be in power."

Now in its third year, MPAS seizes every opportunity to convince male students that sexual violence is their own issue and to encourage them—not just at public events, but one-on-one, in locker rooms, classes, and bars—to take a stand against such violence. In one follow-up to a campus Take Back the Night march, they spread white sheets across a table, opened buckets of paint, and invited male passersby to make handprints on the sheets. The men scrawled their names and this pledge across the prints: "These hands don't hurt."

In the past, most campus campaigns against sexual violence dealt with male students as threats, not allies. Female students were warned to limit where and when they walked alone and were talked to about how to be careful while drinking, how to say no to sexually aggressive boys, and so on. But this approach has been quietly abandoned by many sexual violence activists. They find it objectionable because it hangs

the burden for reducing sexual assault on women, not men, and suggests that women should just keep making their lives smaller and smaller to thwart danger. And in fact, these risk-reduction messages are largely ineffective. They may steer women away from situations in which a stranger could accost them, but most college-age victims—nearly 90 percent, according to the Department of Justice—are raped or sexually assaulted by someone they know. Even the messages that do target acquaintance rape are misleading, suggesting that such assaults are the unfortunate result of too much booze plus simple miscommunication. But the reality is that so-called acquaintance rapists frequently have a history of violence and multiple sexual assaults.

What's radical about the new approach is that it treats men not as monsters but as human beings who have been socialized to accept male privilege and have the potential to change. "The old model

insults men," says Linda. "It says in effect that men can't control their behavior, so women have to control it for them. The new model says that men are quite capable of being responsible for their behavior."

"What happens when you meet a girl at a bar?" Don asks the Dragons. "What do all the guys say the next day?"

"Did you get any?" one of the players offers.

"What else?"

The Dragons look at each other, then they look back at me, the woman taking notes and now ducking behind the lid of an empty pizza box. They mumble but never quite manage to blurt out a phrase. "You feel like you can't talk in front of Kris, so I'll say it," Don says indulgently. "Did you hit it? Did you flip it? Did you slap it? Did you knock the boot? Did you kill it?"

The Dragons laugh nervously.

"That language is violent and dehumanizing," Don tells them. "If you see someone messing up in practice, you say something because you know he'll do it at the game if you don't, right?" Don continues. "Same thing—if you hear a guy talking about his girl and saying, 'The bitch this, the bitch that,' you're not going to be surprised if he goes and hits her. So you've

You can almost
see a new
awareness light
up their brains.

BE A MAN

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 286

got to say something." He's been pondering the language of sexual belittlement for a long time now (he's working on a book about it—*You Throw Like a Girl: Raising Boys to Be "the Man"*). "We dehumanize women by talking like that. Then we don't have to have any sort of conscience about what we do to them. If I hear you talk about women like that and don't say anything, I'm giving you permission to dehumanize them."

The Dragons eye Don thoughtfully. You can almost see a new awareness lighting up different parts of their brains, like the silver spheres that set off the flashes and chimes of a pinball game. One Dragon finally raises his hand. "What do you do when you're the only one who wants to speak up?" he asks, wincing as if he can already imagine a bunch of men looking at him with incredulous eyes.

"You just start the conversation—one at a time." Don smiles as if he suspects that this particular Dragon has just signed on the dotted line. "One at a time. I guarantee you that there are more guys out there who don't like that kind of language than you know." •

Kristin Oblson's memoir, Stalking the Divine, will be published by Hyperion in 2003.
