

BOYS OR MONSTERS?

By Anita Roberts

I've heard the word, "monster" over and over again to describe the two young men who committed the monstrous act, which ended the precious life of Kimberly Proctor. As an educator who has been working in the field of gender socialization and youth violence for over three decades, I have had many, many years to consider the question: Boys or Monsters?

This is the question that I have found myself asking myself and the question that seems to be in the subtext of the media coverage on the ongoing coverage on the Proctor case. It's been just over a year and it seems timely to open a discussion about the socialization of our boys.

I remember hearing this word, Monster, to describe two male university students who raped a female student in the 80's. I wrote a letter at the time, which was published in the Vancouver Sun. The point of which was to say, even "good boys" rape. I find myself once more at the same place in the discussion. Is it male socialization that "grooms" future rapists? As a culture, we teach boys to cut themselves off from their humanity. Don't cry (or show any vulnerable feelings) is the main tenant of our society's not-so-subliminal, "boy's code of conduct". A kind of survival manual passed on, through words and example, from father to son since the dawn of time. A set of rules for being a guy in which the only emotion that is acceptable for males to express is *anger*.

Now add to that the media pressure to be all-powerful at all times. The male role models in the world of men reinforce the unattainable standard of "supermen" (much as girls and women are striving for the unattainable goal of, "supermodel"). Now add the desensitizing effect of violent movies and especially video games that give permission to males to shoot, torture and kill. For fun! Apparently, the boys who took Kimberly's life were avid video game players and shared details of their crime with friends on the World of Warcraft site. In this example, pulled from internet ads for another violent video game, Mafia Wars encourages boys to:

- Discover the sheer joy of knee capping. Do crime jobs for cash, buy powerful weapons and fight!!!
- Find out how much fun you can have robbing, stealing and putting out contracts on your friends.
- It takes more than a code of honor to be a mobster – it takes cunning, deception, ruthlessness, and greed. Sounds like fun doesn't it?

- Life's too short to miss out on all the action. Join the mob today and rob, steal, extort and whack enemies to your heart's content.
- You want to be a "made" man? You think you got what it takes to rule the streets? CLICK now and show us what you got.
- Want a Killer good time? CLICK now and start your own criminal enterprise.
- It takes brain, brawn and brass balls to be a great mobster. So what are you waiting for?
- Surround yourself with thugs, thieves, crooks and bad guys. And that's just your family. Play Mafia Wars. Trust me, you'll love it.

Key words: thugs, thieves, enemies, bad guys, crime, weapons, fight, robbing, stealing, cunning, deception, ruthlessness, greed, extort, whack...how can we even suggest that this kind of "advertising" does not impact the young male mind? Advertisers spend tens of thousands of dollars for a simple magazine ad. They must be fairly certain that their words and images will have an impact and even influence the decisions and behaviours of the reader / potential buyer. We know for a fact that advertising works. It has always stunned me to hear people say that young men know the difference between fiction and real life...that these games do not have an impact on them at all. Through these games, our boys learn to disassociate from the pain of others and "practice" being killers for fun. But this is not a rant on video games. I use this as a small example of how we socialize males in a way that robs them of their basic humanity. In the studies on boys and empathy we have identified that boys have an underdeveloped sense of empathy. Surely it is time to take a close look at how we participate in creating a world of males who have a hard time putting themselves in another's shoes.

We also know that *most* males *don't* hurt women and children. Which means that there are a lot of good men out there. According to the Canadian Women's Foundation, it's also a fact that, "Every minute of every day, a Canadian woman or child is being sexually assaulted." We also know that two women every week are killed by their husbands or boyfriends in Canada, and the United Nations states: "To be injured by a husband or boyfriend is the *leading cause* of injury to women.". So once again the question comes up: Boys or Monsters? Could it be that all the males perpetrating these acts are psychopaths? Why is that when males commit a monstrous act we want to put them into the "monster box"? I believe that when we do this we ease our anxiety about the guys we know and love. Our own partners; our own brothers; our own sons. When we do this we are saying this has nothing to do with our loved ones. Those guys are all crazy. My guys are good.

The two boys who perpetrated the monstrous act last March...were they monsters? Or simply ordinary boys with violent role models both in their homes and in their world. Boys who were taught that being a man meant not having empathy and that violence was a game. My intent is not to diagnose these particular boys...but I do wonder if early treatment for aggression could have derailed what was to come. As long as we continue to interpret the violence our sons

express as, “boys will be boys” we will never be able to take pro-active steps to address unacceptable behaviours.

I would like to highlight the statement one of the boys made about the girl they attacked being “an easy target”; because in the same world where we are giving permission to males to be violent, we are teaching our girls to be nice, polite, trusting and passive. In fact, female socialization programs girls to be exactly that, “easy targets”.

We know for a fact that males commit the vast majority of violence. Are we in such denial about the facts that we cannot see the impact of how we continue to socialize our children? I don't know about the rest of you but I believe that the issue of gender socialization is something that we urgently need to address.

After 35 years of studying this issue and working hands-on with youth, I know that we can pro-actively teach our boys (and our girls) to develop an awareness of their socialization and we can teach them skills to navigate their world in a safe and non-violent way. Imagine a world where we only have to worry about the small percentage of violence that is perpetrated by monsters.

Anita Roberts - April 2011