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### First-ever 'camp' is just for guys - the good and bad

By Rubén Rosario

Updated: 09/22/2010 11:32:26 PM CDT

There's an intriguing camp starting at noon today in St. Paul.

No tents or campsite deposits are needed. Though it runs for two days, there's really no overnight, so you don't need to pack a toothbrush, flashlight or a sleeping bag.

This camp is designed for men to learn more about how our collective actions or inactions perpetuate the historic and perennial violence, exploitation and abuse in many forms against females in our society. I would throw in the whole freaking planet.

It's put together by the Sheila Wellstone Institute, named after the domestic-violence activist wife of Minnesota's legendary if controversial senator, Paul Wellstone. Both were tragically killed in a plane crash seven years ago. As Minnesotans, we lost a lot that day, no matter the political ideology.

I'm told it's not too late to register or attend this "camp." And yes, it's free and open to the public. But it's just for men, like the catchy slogan of that male hair-coloring TV ad.

The promotional flier lays out the goals of the first-ever "Camp Sheila Wellstone for Men."

They include building a stronger coalition of men working against violence in Minnesota, a laudable and noble cause. They also promise to "teach critical organizing and advocacy skills that build power and end violence against women and children."

I don't have a problem with that, either.

Now, I can hear women and some men applauding this effort. But I see eyes rolling and hear in my mind cynical remarks.

"This sounds like some left-wing, feminist-driven propaganda designed to further emasculate us men and make us feel guilty about this issue," is what I hear some saying.

We men love and respect "our" women, doncha know. I truly believe, deep down,

most of us do. Most of us have never hit a woman in anger, even though we know — right, guys? — how they push those buttons that make us figuratively or literally put our fists through doors or drywall. They seem to be born with a gene that makes them experts at manipulating us every which way to ultimately do their will.

Right, guys?

Hey, it wasn't by accident my late stepfather called my mother "The Warden." I call my wife at times "The Prime Minister of Everything." I mean that in a self-effacing, affectionate way. But there's a grain of resigned resentment hidden by her chuckles and mine. It's almost like we men really believe we are at times the truly repressed and oppressed species. I admit publicly now, and with much shame, that I came close one time to losing it during a heated argument. I regret it to this day. Someone — the aforementioned prime minister of everything — thankfully makes it a point to not let me forget it. But heck, I never crossed that physical line. Emotionally? That's worthy of another column.

Yet, this Wellstone camp idea is not for me. It's for those who easily and with much malice cross that line and beat up or — four times daily in this nation — end up killing "their" women, right?

Well, no, event organizers tell me. It's actually more for those men who get it as well as us "well-meaning men," as camp keynote speaker Ted Bunch describes most of us guys. He believes we are as much to blame for the problem as the batterer. No way. Come again? "I would like to believe that the majority of men are well-meaning," writes Bunch, co-founder of the New York City-based A Call To Men organization and former founder and director of the largest male batterer treatment and prevention program in the country.

"It is this group, however, that is responsible for supporting the epidemic of violence that the abusive men inflict upon women," Bunch adds in a 2005 dissertation that should be required reading for all males, boys to men. "Men who choose to remain silent constantly reinforce the abusive man's behavior. Our silence is also our permission."

Say what? Now, this is heavy stuff. I need concrete examples.

"We do this in many ways," Bunch obliges. "Sometimes, it is as simple as remaining silent when a sexist joke is told or not challenging a friend who makes a statement that degrades women or is threatening to women.

"The well-meaning man, at times, will go right up against the line of inappropriate behavior," Bunch continues. "But, as long as he doesn't cross it (or get caught crossing it), he is still considered a good guy. When men do not speak out about violence against women, they are taking an active and/or passive role in affirming the violence. When we remain bystanders, we are making a choice to support the abuse."

Wow. What's he on?

The continuing objectification of women, he argues, is manifested in the multi-billion-dollar sex-trade industry and permeates every segment of society.

I thought about this a bit. Here's the montage of images that flashed through my remaining and fast-regressing brain cells, in no particular order: Hooters.

Playboy. Hustler. Girls Gone Wild. The porn industry. Women generally paid less than men. Rap and music videos that essentially demean and insult our mothers, sisters and daughters. Sports cheerleaders forced to wear sexy outfits. Taking a friend's friend, among others, to visit a "hooker" at a hotel after a bachelor's party in my early college days. But, hey, I did not cross that line. He did. Bunch includes in his 5-year-old essay some sobering numbers from national studies or reports that are still true today:

Roughly 4 million men severely assault their intimate female partners or spouses each year. Men's violence against their intimate female partners is the leading cause of injury for women and the cause of at least 35 percent of all emergency room visits. One of every four men batters a woman during pregnancy, according to Justice Department figures.

Men will rape one out of six women and commit more than 300,000 acts of rape and sexual assault every year. It is estimated that 84 percent of rapes and sexual assaults go unreported. "Any violence, abuse or degradation committed toward a woman by a man supports the status of men as the dominating group while also reinforcing the oppression of women," Bunch writes. "There is no neutral position or stance for men to take. We can either choose to become part of the solution or remain part of the problem."

Ah, what does he know anyway? But even though I consider myself a good guy who has not crossed that "line," I may just stop by and hear him out today. Rubén Rosario can be reached at 651-228-5454 or rrosario@ [pioneerpress.com](mailto:rrosario@pioneerpress.com).

To learn more about "Camp Sheila Wellstone for Men," which runs today and Friday at the Best Western Kelly Inn on St. Anthony Avenue in St. Paul, go to [wellstone.org/camp-sheila-wellstone-men](http://wellstone.org/camp-sheila-wellstone-men).

To read domestic violence expert Ted Bunch's 2005 essay on ending men's violence against women, go to [TwinCities.com](http://TwinCities.com).