

Origins of Mainely Men

Excerpts from “The Origins of Mainely Men” as shared by Willy Willette

Some of you may be surprised to learn that the original Mainely Men conference was planned as a one-time event. Since I feel good about my own involvement in the origins of Mainely Men, I'd like to look back ten years and share some of its history with those of you who weren't around at the beginning.

Mainely Men was really an outgrowth of my own needs. By 1980, I'd known for some time that my life was not being fulfilled through relationships with women. Many of the women I knew were supportive and felt good about me as a man, but something was missing. The relationships didn't seem to go quite far enough. I had many unanswered questions.

In the spring of 1980 I drove to New Hampshire for my first men's conference. Only two of us were from Maine. As a result of that conference, a men's group was formed in Newburyport, Massachusetts. We met there for a weekend each month.

After months of traveling to Newburyport, something occurred to me: all men with needs similar to mine didn't necessary live in Massachusetts. There had to be like-minded men in Maine as well. That's when a friend and I sat down at the kitchen table and started planning a Maine Men's conference.

Since Maine covers a lot of territory, one of the first questions to answer was: Where should the conference be held? Luckily, I was familiar with Pilgrim Lodge through a friend who was a counselor there. The Lodge met several important requirements: central location within the state, a quiet lakeside setting, availability of cabins and a kitchen . . . and the price was right.

What we wanted the conference to do was simple: Get a group of men together to talk about what it was like to be a man. So we described the focus of the conference as “Changing roles for men in Maine – Mainely Men.” We sent information about the first Mainely Men to everyone we could think of who might be interested. We also contacted newspapers and posted notices throughout the community.

Thirty five of the men who responded, including fifteen from Massachusetts, attended Mainely Men One. The conference schedule was similar to the one we still use, but the first Mainely Men workshops were pretty basic. They addressed such broad, but-level topics as men and work, men and play and men and sexuality.

Early on we decided not to bring in “experts” to “lead” these workshops for two reasons. If a workshop leader was only around for two hours, would participants have time to process the results before he left? I thought some people might never finish processing and would feel frustrated.

Secondly, I felt experts were unnecessary. Wouldn't there be enough resources within the “family” of conference participants to explore men's issues in a productive way? It seemed to me that getting to know one another, and growing with each other over a whole weekend would be the most important part of the exploration process – and experience has proven that to be true. Particularly during the first years of Mainely Men when attendance was no greater than fifty people, it was easy to get the intimacy necessary for personal growth.

By the way, then, as now, workshop attendance was not compulsory. I wanted Mainely Men to be a place where you could just be yourself, or get to know yourself, in a relaxed setting. So if someone wanted to come to Mainely Men and spend the whole weekend in a canoe, that was okay – and still is.

Mainely Men is obviously different things to different people, but I feel the most important benefit to be gained from the experience is trust. Mainely Men is a safe place to have feelings. Men can be whoever they want sexually. They're not treated as sexual objects but as spiritual beings, people with feelings. From this experience the realization grows that not all men are out there to mess you over. You're free to let down your guard – to trust.

I personally have grown from the Mainely Men experience – being able to love men, and know it doesn't have to be sexual. As a matter of fact, I've learned how to love both men and women “from the waist up.”

Success has given Mainely Men a life of its own. We've worked hard over the years to keep Mainely Men within the generic context of the men's movement, that is, free of sexist labels and stereotyping. Whatever an individual may or may not get from the Mainely Men experience, I think most of us who have been involved with agree that Mainely Men is, above all, a “safe place to be” for all men.

These words were written 25 years ago by one of our founders on the occasion of Mainely Men 20.