

feature

Leaping Forward:

Sexual abuse therapist Mike Lew talks with OITM writer and abuse survivor Christopher Kaufman about men's abuse and recovery in an intense weekend workshop.



"The process of breathing new life into my soul is a committed ongoing process."
— Brent, age 48, in *Men Leaping Upon the Mountains*

One day in the spring of 2001, a member of the sub-committee that would later become SafeSpace handed out fliers for Mike Lew's weekend workshop at the Kirkridge Retreat Center in Pennsylvania's Poconos Mountains. I quickly pocketed the flier, got my therapist to write me a recommendation and off I went, blithely and with no real advance preparation. When I drove down to Kirkridge I really had no idea what to expect. Like many of the men who have worked with Mike Lew, when I returned home a mere seventy-two hours later, I was changed forever.

Out in the Mountains asked me to interview Mike for publication during Domestic and Sexual Violence Awareness Month. We talked via email from my office at the R.U.1.2? Community Center while he was doing work in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

OITM: Mike, when I went to Kirkridge, I was introduced to the story of *The Little Prince* for the first time. Working with that story really moved me. What is it about the little prince and his search for friends that inspires you and moves you to do your work with male survivors of sexual abuse?

Mike: Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's classic, *The Little Prince*, if not the original "inner child" story, is the finest example of the genre. It speaks to the core of childhood: the essence of what it feels like to be young, small, and trying to make sense of an odd, alien world populated by large, incomprehensible creatures. I haven't yet met anyone who knows this book and doesn't love it; it is full of insight and humor — brilliantly combining naiveté and sophistication. I have found that it carries a particular resonance for people who have spent much of their lives feeling like outsiders — lost, alien, confused and/or rejected. This category, of course, includes male survivors.

OITM: When I arrived at Kirkridge in 2001, virtually everyone I spent time with was queer. It was very difficult to arrive at Kirkridge and not know "where I stood" in regards to the other men in the room. What do you think is behind this dynamic between straight, bi and gay survivors?

Mike: Friday evening, at the beginning of first

meeting of a weekend workshop, the level of terror in the room is so strong that no one can be unaware of it. Participants address their fears in various ways, but nobody is completely free of anxiety at this point. One manifestation of this anxiety is that people try to figure out who in the group is gay and who is straight. They aren't really trying to determine sexuality; they are trying to figure out who is safe and who is dangerous. In a homophobic society — one that confuses same sex child abuse with homosexuality and gay men with child molesters, and where many gay men have been humiliated, insulted, and treated violently by other men — it is understandable that fears of abuse and violence can be translated into homophobia or heterophobia.

One of the magical experiences of these workshops is the transformation that occurs in the course of the weekend. The men who participate reach past labels and stereotypical categories, moving through their fears and hurts to connect with one another's essential humanity. I can't explain the process by which this takes place, but it is a profound event for everyone who experiences it. It has happened every time. I am moved by it each time I witness it.

Through courageous action during the weekend, many of the men present have developed surprising alliances. Each individual's essential humanity stands revealed — and the revelation is impressive.

OITM: I think many queer male survivors struggle at some point in their life with questions about whether their experience of sexual abuse "caused" them to be queer. The Kirkridge retreats seem to have a much higher percentage of men who have sex with men attending than you would expect from the gay/straight ratio in the general population.

Mike: Some years ago I heard an address that Claudia Black, an author and a guru of the Adult Children of Alcoholics movement, delivered at the National Gay and Lesbian Health Conference. This straight woman was asked why there is an overrepresentation of gay men and lesbians in treatment programs, 12-step groups and rehab facilities. She replied that she didn't think that gays and lesbians were sicker than other groups. Rather, she said, throughout history populations that have suffered oppression have had to learn to advocate for and create their own services. Also, people who have struggled against discrimination have figured out the value of these struggles.

I would add that our society's rampant homophobia, sexism, and oppressive ideas about masculinity keep many male survivors silent about the abuse they suffered. A large number of heterosexual men, fearing that disclosing that they were abused would cause them to be labeled *gay*, are reluctant to risk attending recovery events.

OITM: It seems clear to me that fear of childhood abuse (along with misogyny) is one of the great contributors towards both institutional and personal or internalized homophobia. Institutionally we see this in the Catholic Church's drive to scapegoat gay priests for sexual abuse crimes. On a personal level, it seems that most queer bashers use some variant of "he tried to hit on me" to justify their violence. What are some of the ways that you see homophobia and trans-phobia manifesting among survivors?

Mike: A society that treats children (or women — or any group) as property is setting the groundwork for all manner of injuries. We all know what can be done with property; it can be harmed, destroyed or discarded with impunity. A society that defines any group as "less than" ultimately robs all of its members of their full humanity. Everyone loses.

The more general the acceptance of marginalizing or dehumanizing of any segment of the population, the easier it is to get away with mistreating them. And, as we have seen throughout history, the easier it is to scapegoat them.

Recently, we have seen this manifested in attempts to misdirect outrage about sexual child abuse by clergy: defining the problem as caused by gay priests, celibacy, lack of ordination of women, and other issues. However one feels about these questions, in this case they are red herrings. They attempt to distract us from the real issues: the sexual abuse of children and the [institutional] protection of adult sexual predators.

My short response is that homophobia and heterophobia hurt everyone. One of the primary effects of all forms of harmful stereotyping is to keep us separated from our natural allies. Male and female survivors are natural allies; so are gay and straight survivors. Abuse happens in isolation. Isolation is damaging. Scary as it is, recovery happens in the company of others. We need each other. Fortunately, more and more, we are learning that we *have* each other.

OITM: You ask men to share their feeling in ways that many men have never before experienced. Can you tell us something about acting as a catalyst for this work? How has the work changed your life? What kinds of communities are you a part of now that were unexpected when you began this work?

Mike: I don't ask men to share their feelings — I *welcome* their feelings. We talk about the nature of feelings and the fear of emotions. I ask participants to do nothing that isn't right for them. When people are ready — and sufficient safety has been established — the feelings appear on their own. Yes, it's often intense, but it is also healing. And survivors don't attend these events hoping that nothing will happen.

In the new edition of *Victims No Longer* [due in January, 2004], I talk about many of the ways that this work has changed my life. I doubt that it is possible to be exposed to the courage, creativity, strength and dedication that I witness and not be profoundly affected. I feel immensely fortunate to get to work with people I admire tremendously — survivors and their allies, male and female, gay and straight, throughout the world. I have met survivors of all backgrounds, races, ethnicities, religions, professions, and sexual orientations. I feel more and more that I am part of a world-

wide movement of recovery and liberation that will benefit all of humanity. Recovery — each individual's recovery — matters.

OITM: One of the last things you ask of the men who come to Kirkridge is that they share some part of their creative expression. In a world where men are socialized to be "productive" and women are socialized to be "creative," what kinds of changes have you noticed in men who may never have thought of themselves as artists, poets, singers, dramatists or drag queens? How do men react to being supported in their creativity?

Mike: The preparation and presentation of creativity at Kirkridge is about healing, not about performance. It offers an opportunity to begin to heal another hurt — in this case in the area of creativity. I encourage people to risk being creative in an area that has been difficult for them. On Saturday evening the results of their creativity are offered to the most supportive and appreciative audience imaginable. For many male survivors this experience is one of the most powerful of the weekend. It contradicts negative messages that they have carried for years. These evenings are different every year. They are always extraordinary.

OITM: In closing, when I came to Kirkridge, I had very little trust available for anyone in the room. By the time I left, there was a fundamental shift in my relationship to myself and my relationship to other men, especially straight men. Where do you think this shift is coming from? Will it last?

Mike: You report just the experience I was talking about — that I always hope for. And I have not yet been disappointed.

If this were a live interview, instead of via email, I would turn it around and ask you to talk about the specifics of the "fundamental shift" you refer to. Whenever I have the privilege of witnessing it, it makes all the difference in the world. It reminds me of why I do this work, and of what it is possible for people (yes, for men) to accomplish. It offers hope and confidence. And it presents a challenge.

It is a lot more difficult to sustain the momentum of the supportive relationships forged at a workshop after one returns to everyday life. But nothing is more important than helping to create a world where all of us are treated with dignity and respect. The alternative is unthinkable. We can't afford to go back to "business as usual." Despite the current political situation, I see reason for optimism. More and more people are actively engaged in recovery. More and more of us are dedicated to valuing our full human diversity. I believe that we are succeeding. ▼

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Kirkridge 2003

Leaping Upon the Mountains: A Men's Abuse Recovery Weekend
Facilitated by Mike Lew and Thom Harrigan

May 9-11, 2003 at the Kirkridge Retreat and Study Center, Bangor, Pennsylvania
\$310.00 (some scholarships may be available). For more information, call (610) 588-1793

The weekend is for men actively engaged in therapy. A letter of recommendation from your therapist is required.