

Man to man in search of answers

The first men-only summer school this weekend at first sight, a summer school for men evokes images of lazy days lying about and watching the GAA championship matches and country shows, and all never too far from the bar. Of men being well, stereotypical men.

But this is different. The first ever Summer School for Men in Ireland will take place in Waterford from Friday to Sunday next. The whole point of the exercise is for men to come together to discuss the important issues in their lives, whether it's fathering, marriage, sport, support, health, unemployment or anything else that is on men's minds.

It is the brainchild of Alan O'Neill, who is the co-ordinator of the south-east Men's Network. His aim is "for this summer school to bring men together from around the country who have been exploring the idea of men having a look at their lives and the issues they struggle with in their lives."

However, the weekend — which is residential — won't take the conventional summer school format of inputs from known experts in the field. For Alan, "it is about ordinary men bringing their own information and experiences and presenting them. This is meant as a deliberate alternative to the normal format of experts presenting papers. We believe that ordinary men have a lot of their own expertise to share and from which we can benefit."

Not surprisingly, then, Alan is keen to deny the rumour that Mike Tyson will be leading the workshop on sensitivity and men's vulnerability, and he insists that there is no need to bring protective headgear to the summer school. Nor is it true that Brendan McGahon is doing a session on "exploring

Mike Tyson won't be teaching sensitivity, and Jackie Healy Rea won't be giving lessons in dress sense. Instead, writes Harry Ferguson, participants in the first men-only summer school will be trying to solve the deeper problems facing the modern male.

men's sexuality" or that there will be an input from Jackie Healy-Rea on men's fashion.

The SE Men's Network was set up full-time in 1997 with Department of Social Welfare funding after over a decade of starting men's groups on a part-time basis. Alan O'Neill is the first full-time co-ordinator of a network of men's personal development groups in the world, never mind Ireland. He basically spends his time travelling around the region — which stretches from Westford to Tipperary to Athy — starting men's groups in community development projects and community resource and unemployment centres.

He is the Arnold Schwarzenegger of the Irish men's movement, always assuring the men with whom he works of his on-going support that "I'll be back".

The Network primarily seeks to target unemployed men and men who are isolated and excluded from society in other ways, and through men's development

groups to work to build the men's self esteem and confidence so they can fully take part in their communities and forge meaningful lives for themselves.

Men of all ages, from 15 to 75, have attended previous events and are welcome to the summer school. It is also open to men from all walks of life, on the basis that all men have similar struggles.

The main conference theme is 'Men Giving Each Other A Hand', which means men finding ways of supporting one another in an emotional as well as practical sense. If the idea of men giving each other a hand in a way other than the traditional handshake makes you feel even slightly uncomfortable, then the whole point of this event will be worthwhile.

Such discomfort reflects the huge resistance there is to men being masculine in

with women, children, men and our colleagues prove to be more difficult than we imagined." Then there is the fact that the traditional role of men is changing and "a large number of Irish have realised that it's time for men to take responsibility for ourselves and that the best way of doing that is getting together with like minded men."

Notions of the so-called 'Men's Movement' and men's groups are now quite well established in the western world. But what is remarkable about the way men's issues and groups are developing in Ireland is that it is not just a movement of middle-class, professional men but huge numbers of working class men are getting involved and are now leading the development of actual support services for men.

The Men's Network Resource Centre of Ireland recently launched in Ballymun exemplifies this. Headed up by local man Tommy Spooner, it provides an actual advice and support centre for men, as well as co-ordinating information on men's groups and issues nationally. The Summer School will aim to show men from other groups and networks the sort of work the South-East-Network has been doing, the way that it is done, and the results, and to hear what the experiences of other men's groups and networks have been.

But why are such events organised for men only? They are certainly not to be seen as just another opportunity for men to escape the wife and children for a weekend away with the lads. Men can certainly have some crack together — we all need and deserve that. But at a much deeper level it's about focusing on needs and responsibilities. Traditionally, Alan says, "we men have turned our backs on women when we've needed



support and the first step in taking responsibility for ourselves is turning to another man for mutual support and being willing to be vulnerable with other men.

"It's good for men to address men's issues on their own, because some of the misinformation that men carry about themselves and about women is very nasty, and it's safer than men admit to and acknowledge this nastiness in men only gatherings."

This means men taking on the painful issues of power and sexism. For Alan, "sexism says that men are better than women,

but, surprise, surprise, men feel awful about themselves. So the Summer School will explore why this so and will do some work at taking sexism out of the way men relate to women and try to deepen understandings of its effects on women."

But because society is sexist against women doesn't mean that some men aren't mistreated in some ways by the system. The most publicised issues at the moment is separated fathers' custody and access rights to their children. So the summer school will be looking at the balance between the rights of men

and women and young people and exploring what Alan calls "the effects of anger and grief on clear thinking".

"We need to explore how separated fathers, for example, can express their love for their children in an inclusive way," he says.

It is precisely through engaging with these difficult issues that in Alan O'Neill's experience "men also get a chance to explore how loving and good they are, and to learn to be emotionally expressive. Learning to say 'I love you' with a real expression and a real tone."

So, while women won't be at the summer school — not even, let it be stressed, to make the tea — such events ultimately lead men to have improved relationships with women, children and other men.

● The Men's Summer School runs from July 13 to 14 and is residential. To secure a place men need to book immediately. For further information contact Alan O'Neill at 051-396172

● Harry Ferguson works in the Department of Applied Social Studies, UCC, where he teaches on gender and men's issues.

It is not just a movement of middle-class, professional men. Huge numbers of working class men are getting involved and taking leading roles

ways other than the traditional stereotype. It is men who have largely created this situation and who have to change it.

According to Alan O'Neill, "Men go to these sorts of events because life is hard. Our relationships

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