

BREAKTHROUGH

LIFE TOOLS FOR MEN



HEALTHY ROLE MODELS Graduates of the Breakthrough Men's Community program report a range of benefits, including improved relationships with their children.

Male Call

Longtime men's education and support program comes to Santa Cruz County **BY ANDREW STEINGRUBE**

In 1987, counselor and teacher of nonviolent communication Fred Jealous founded a men's education and support program called Breakthrough Men's Community with just himself and six others in the Monterey area. Thirty years and 2,000 graduates later, the program continues to expand, and now is offered in Santa Cruz.

"Fred had a strong belief that the way men are raised in this culture is damaging," says Breakthrough executive director Chris Fitz, who graduated the program five years ago. "We are brought up to believe that boys must sacrifice their humanity to be 'real men,' and that the only way to relate to other men is to compete with them. Because of the way we're raised, there is a lot of distrust in other men."

A major tenet of the program, says Fitz, is that men need the support of other men to heal and regain the humanity that has often been socialized out of them. Another emphasis of the program is that experiencing

emotions is a good thing, and it seeks to emulsify the oil-and-water-like relationship between vulnerability and traditional male culture.

"Most men coming to Breakthrough are facing a big life challenge, but many others aren't in crisis and are just looking for deeper meanings, meaningful friendships, and a sense of community," says Fitz, who emphasizes that Breakthrough isn't geared just to men who may feel broken in some way. "At Breakthrough, we believe every man can benefit from the program."

Fitz says program graduates include men from all walks of life—their backgrounds, educational and occupational pedigrees are as diverse as their various ethnicities, religions, and sexual orientations. He says the average attendee is between 40 and 45 years old, but adds that there have been graduates as young as 18, all the way up to men in their 70s.

Fitz says that participants of Breakthrough

usually find it to be a very compelling, profound experience. He says that the most common feedback he hears from graduates is that Breakthrough "saved my life, saved my marriage, saved my relationship with my kids, or helped me through a painful divorce."

A 2008 Blue Shield study on Breakthrough confirmed these sentiments, finding that the word "transformative" best described the Breakthrough experience, and that 91 percent of survey respondents used the words "enormous" or "considerable" to describe the impact that Breakthrough had on their lives.

But such transformation comes with a level of time commitment that sets Breakthrough apart from other programs of its kind. The program is 34 weeks long, which is broken up into two 17-week sessions. Each of these sessions has 14 evening classes, two all-day Saturday courses, and one weekend retreat. Most of the work is done in small groups, where participants learn to put the lessons into action.

"Practice makes perfect, and it takes time to rewire the neural pathways so we can live our lives differently," says Fitz. He emphasizes the importance of taking one's time and going slowly, providing men with the support to practice things like affirmations, identifying triggers with issues like anger addiction, and taking time and space to contemplate and reflect.

Breakthrough is a nonprofit organization, and tuition is done on a sliding scale. "No willing participant has ever been turned away for financial reasons in 30 years," Fitz says. About 40 percent of Monterey participants are referred by their therapists, with the other 60 percent being referred by word-of-mouth. Fitz adds that many of these referrals are given by women, who, he says, have a more instinctual understanding of the benefits a support community can provide. A similar program called Breakfree was subsequently created for women.

"Women get right away what we're all about," says Fitz.

The Santa Cruz course will be held at the Monterey Coast Preparatory School in Scotts Valley and with introductory evenings on April 18, May 2, May 9, May 16., 7-9pm. Visit breakthroughformen.org for more information.

Breakthrough Men's Community

At the Monterey Coast Preparatory School, 125 Bethany Drive, Scotts Valley **831.375.5441** | breakthroughformen.org

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