



The Boyhood Project / Kristian Orozco

BY BETHANY SALTMAN
ART BY JULIE O'ROURKE

“Manhood is changing—it is remaking itself for this new century.”

Bethany Saltman (BS): Your mission statement is “Raising and educating emotionally intelligent boys.” What inspired this specific focus?

Kristian Orozco (KO): Manhood is changing—it is remaking itself for this new century. The fantastic work done on women’s empowerment has changed the dynamics in society. As an extension of those changes, it’s very natural that manhood would be redefining itself into something different. And so, in doing some research, I realized that [in many respects] the wiring of boys is different from the wiring of girls. For instance, women—both culturally and individually—often have an easier access to their emotions. And they feel more comfortable working with that. Social-emotional intelligence, which is being studied very scientifically, is key to this generation’s ability to thrive in this new century. I knew that was an important component in bringing up boys. And I started off focused on just “raising emotionally intelligent boys to thrive in the world.” And since I started working in schools, I’ve added the “educating.”

BS: What is your background?

KO: I’m originally from Nicaragua, and I moved to California when I was 10 as a result of the Civil War that broke out in 1978-79. My brother and my sister and I went to California right before the fighting got out of control.

I majored in music, which is what brought me to New York. And then I got into book publishing. And then, in the Fall of 2009, I said, “Wait a minute, what do I really need to be doing?” For most of my life, I’d always been a mentor. My first paid job was as a tutor to a girl. I think she was in 2nd or 3rd grade. So, I trained as a Life Coach.

BS: It sounds like you knew you needed something new.

KO: Yes. And I felt that even if it took me on a complete left turn, I was perfectly fine with that. I needed something that I could wake up [to every day and feel] really passionate about.

BS: When were your two sons born?

KO: My oldest was born in January, 2008. By the time I actually finished my coach-

training and I had decided to choose parenting as my niche, my second boy had been born in July, 2010.

BS: Are there people in your field whom you particularly admire?

KO: I follow very closely the work of Michael Gurian, who wrote a book called *The Wonder of Boys*.

His institution, which is called the Gurian Institute, specializes in working with parents, as well as educators and school districts, to teach some of the best practices of working with boys in schools, and also working with girls in schools. So he really talks about playing to the strengths of both.

BS: As the mother of a girl, can you give me a sense of why a parent of sons might come to you, and how you might work with them?

KO: Sure. Maybe your boy is more likely to run around before he’s able to settle down. So now that you know that, how do you teach him? Where do you go from there? And that’s the basis of my coaching work. We may even look at what brought parents to a particular belief system about manhood or parenthood, or what it means to be a woman, or how boys should behave. And then we create a plan from there. I ask, in spite of the fact that this is their history of what they’ve been through and what they believe, how do they move forward in a way that actually works for them?

BS: Since you see that boys tend to have a hard time in school, I imagine you see implications for classrooms?

KO: Right. Whenever I do the social-emotional literacy program that I introduced at my local school, all seven of the kindergarten classes attend. And I stand back and observe how they are engaging. What are the girls doing? What are the

boys doing? And it’s not to put people in a box, but to understand where they’re at and then be able to engage them based on what specific needs they’re expressing. And I do often find that it’s the girls who are just sitting there waiting for the lesson to start. The boys are very restless and they push each other. Though, actually, in one of the classes I teach, there are three girls who are at the same level of energy as the boys and [who exhibit the same] inability to settle down. There are also boys who can sit there longer than other boys can.

So when I do the class, I’ll say, “Let’s move around. Let’s jump. Let’s do something.” I always try to incorporate something physical. Because at a certain point, any kid will check out if they just hear me talking. We could change the way that a classroom flows, or [the way it] is set up. Maybe we change when we take breaks and what kind of breaks we take.

Parents of older boys will say, “Oh, God, it just takes so long to get him to settle down to do the homework. You hear that again and again and again. And so when I work with parents, I always look at what strategies we [can] implement that [would] address their boy’s level of energy.

So there’s looking at his given nature, and then [looking at] who he is as a personality, as well. And then how do you nurture that? So that’s my approach.

BS: How do you incorporate parents, and their own conditioning, into the process?

KO: I actually begin working with the parents themselves. Together, we look at their values, their priorities, and their principles: how do you want to raise your son, how do you want your household to run? And then, as we work on building that foundation, we get into a whole paradigm shift where I say this is where boys are at, this is some of the wiring, this is what you can expect. If you channel aggression

properly, then you might get that energy to fuel his ability to thrive in the world.

It was mostly moms coming in for the longest time. And I would hear about where the dad was at through the mom. What keeps coming up, more or less, are the traditional things that we're still dealing with, which is that dad is the breadwinner, [so] he has to work, [and] he spends more time [away from home].

I'm beginning to work with the fathers, now. Both moms and dads are dealing with what I call a very outdated way of raising or engaging children, which is punitive: punishment, punishment, punishment.

BS: Behaviorism.

KO: And we're finding out that it doesn't work.

BS: Right.

KO: And for dads, [there are a] lot of ideas of what a man should be. So in the work that I do, my goal is not to change their minds as to how they should raise sons. I just give them the information and best practices based on studies and research. The parenting still has to be a reflection of what they want. For many dads, when we get into that conversation that is a little bit more personal, what comes up is feeling that they were robbed of having access to a side of themselves that they knew existed, that emotional world that exists. And they want that access for their sons. And so, for them, it's really a struggle between what they believe and how they were raised—the wiring, or the default tendencies that they have—versus what it is they want for their sons.

They are really going up against that belief system of how they see men, how men should be, how boys should be.

BS: Can you give an example of how this comes into play between men and their sons?

KO: One of the things that I say to men is, rather than jumping to conclusions, or rather than jumping into telling your son what he should be doing, ask him, "How do you feel about that?" I tell them, you can ask "What do you think?" but don't forget to ask "What do you feel?" Because that gives you access to that emotional world and that's when intelligence comes in.

This can be very challenging because now we're going to go down the path of feelings, [which is an area] that men maybe don't have a lot of experience [with]. In fact, perhaps I myself don't quite know what I'm feeling. So it's very hard. So the challenge comes not only in having that conversation, but also in modeling. How do I show my son what it means [for me] to be aware of what's going on within me?

BS: That does sound challenging.

KO: To really talk about the emotion itself—how are you feeling—and then to cope with the feeling how do you support them through that feeling? How do you get them to navigate through that? A lot of men just aren't used to having those conversations because of how they were raised. The whole idea of really talking about feelings—most men are still not doing it because of the fear that the minute they begin to talk about feelings, they become vulnerable.

Brené Brown's book, *Daring Greatly*, was also very influential to me, [especially] when she talks about vulnerability and shame. I realized that, for men, their biggest fear is to be shamed, because that makes them vulnerable, which then shows how weak they are. And she also mentions in the book, where she's addressing women, that, yes, we ask men to be vulnerable, but the minute they begin

to be vulnerable and they really show us their weaknesses, we can get disgusted by that. And we're kind of like—get your act together. And it really struck me when she said that. She says that most men learn how to pretend to be vulnerable.

BS: So do you share the opinion that boys are being overmedicated and misunderstood?

KO: Completely. I believe the current world of education is not very friendly to boys. And what I mean by that is in simple things, like cutting back on recess. It's not even friendly to girls, to be honest with you. It's just not very friendly to children today. It's not supportive. Kids need to run.

BS: And play.

KO: Yes, they need to clear their minds. They need to have physical exercise. So when I read articles about this state or this school district cutting back on recess or extending the school day, I see that as one way in which education is not very friendly to boys. That's stifling creativity—for everyone. I agree with Ken Robinson that we need to take our current model of education and break it.

BS: But everybody would benefit from that, right?

KO: Exactly.

BS: You mentioned the distractibility of boys. How much of that do you think has to do with technology, and the way that kids are plugged in so much of the time?

BS: Technology is very challenging to parents. I think that technology is yet another platform, another way to teach my sons life skills. But a lot of technology really speaks to the need for immediate gratification. And so I think that's definitely one of the things to watch out for, the way that

boys are with technology, which can really distract them from learning patience and self-management and things like that.

So, kids—especially boys, given where they're at—need to have media literacy, as well as social-emotional literacy, taught in schools. We need to address the concerns around media literacy, including the way they're texting to each other instead of talking face-to-face. So we should teach them how to engage with technology smartly, and to also learn social-emotional literacy—things like empathy, self-management, behavioral self-control, emotional self-awareness.

There are studies that show that once kids get past a certain point with a video game, boys can become very aggressive. We have very little technology at home, and no television, for example. We have laptops and our smartphones and that's it. But if our six-year-old is playing an age-appropriate video game for the 15- or 20-minute limit—whatever it might be—and he goes beyond that, suddenly we tend to see how it's harder to take it away, and that he's more prone to getting a little bit more worked up. I wouldn't say aggressive or violent, but . . .

BS: Agitated.

KO: Yes, more agitated. And I believe that does have an impact.

BS: Right.

KO: So I tell parents, what you allow in your household should definitely be a reflection of—again—your values and your principles.

BS: That is probably challenging for people because we're not used to reflecting and articulating that.

KO: Definitely. Very challenging. And I always say whether we're aware of it, we're

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honoring some type of value. In the work that I do with parents, I create paradigm shifts so that the mom, for instance, also feels very empowered as an individual, as a woman. So that she feels she can own her personal power, for example. That is one of the social-emotional literacy competencies that I tend to work on with moms the most—personal power, so that she can work on a rule or work on a certain limit and be able to stand by it. So, when all the strategies come in, the parents need to feel that they have a very good foundation.

BS: Personally?

KO: Personally. So all the little personal gremlins that tend to come up—the guilt that you feel, for instance—whatever you believe that could stand in the way of you implementing a strategy that will give you that resolve that you are seeking.

BS: What is your sense of the parenting scene these days? What are some of the issues that parents are really worried about? And how do you understand the way that parents are being talked to by all the millions of experts?

KO: This is what I say to parents: I believe that you as a mom, or that you as a dad, already have all of your resources within you. Because our world is moving very fast, we tend to quickly look to the experts, to the book, the article, the blog, whatever it is to try to find that solution for that immediate thing that I’m currently dealing with. And that’s perfectly legit. At the same time, if you’re not doing that inner work, if you’re not working on personal growth and development, then you tend to rely a lot on the experts—that kind of elevates what they have to say to a level that may not be appropriate for who they are. We become very child-focused and we forget that our work is actually more parent-focused—focused on ourselves.

BS: Right.

KO: People introduce me as a parenting expert, and I always tell them not to use that word because I’m not. I’m not an expert.

BS: Who could possibly be an expert at raising human beings?

KO: I happen to be a parent and I happen to have boys at home, and my house is actually a lab. People always laugh when I say that, but it’s true. To me it’s like a lab because I kind of step away from it and I look at it as a dad [who is] not only experiencing and trying a new strategy, but wondering, “How is this working? What did I say? What did I do? What did they say? How did they respond?” Needless to say, my wife is happy that I do this work. But that’s not to say that my sons are angels, or that they’re perfect in that sense.

BS: So what are some of the struggles that you, personally, come up against as a father?

KO: One of them is a very typical challenge of most fathers—the amount of time I’m actually able to dedicate to my kids. I work for myself. I have a lot of flexibility. So I’ll go to school, I’ll go to that performance that they’re having, I will take them to the dentist in the middle of the afternoon. I have that flexibility to spend time with them, addressing some of their needs, or being supportive with them based on what they’re doing at school or at preschool. I’m able to do that.

At the same time, because I’m working for myself, I often find myself needing to engage in some work-related thing during a time when—if I was working 9-to-5—I might be more available to them. So I am definitely straddling that thing of figuring out how much time [should be] dedicated to work and how much time [should be] dedicated to them. And because time moves very fast, if I’m not conscious, it will default to my wife doing the bedtime

routine. And then I realize, “Oh, I haven’t done the bedtime routine this whole week because I was at that workshop that one day, and then I went and I did that presentation at the library the other evening,” and so that’s a little bit of the quandary I find myself in.

BS: That makes sense, and is true for so many of us who work for ourselves—moms and dads. And are you finding that parents are really into your message?

KO: They are. There are actually very few people dedicated to working with boys, though I’m actually very happy about President Obama’s initiative called My Brother’s Keeper. My work is about honoring the spectrum of boys, and realizing that the old notions of what manhood meant, what boyhood meant, is no longer applicable.

BS: Anything is possible.

KO: I read an article from a UK paper that talked about how, while the sui-

cide rate had been dropping, the suicide rates for men in their 50s had dramatically increased. Why would that be? So of course the UK government is launching a campaign to be able to address that. Once you get into your 40s and 50s, you kind of reassess your life and where you’re at. And that old paradigm of what manhood means comes up, and I don’t know the reason why men would go that route, but I can understand why some of what we’re hearing about what men need to be or what society is asking of men can be very challenging.

BS: And maybe they reach a point where they realize they are unfulfilled.

KO: They’re unfulfilled at a personal level. Maybe they feel they don’t have what it takes to be able to navigate this new world. Which is why for me, social-emotional literacy is the foundation of the work I do. I believe that will be the key to boys and girls being able to navigate this very complex world we’re living in.

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SUMMER 2014

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