

**Santa:** Broadcasting from the University of British Columbia, this is *Blue & Goldcast*. I'm Santa Ono, the President and Vice-Chancellor of UBC. On this season of the *Blue & Goldcast*, I'm speaking with the people who are helping to shape UBC's next century, and leading some of the most innovative and creative work coming out of our campuses.

**Santa:** Today, I'm joined by David Kuhl. He's a Professor in the Department of Family Practice in our Faculty of Medicine. He's the Co-founder of Blueprint, an organization that works towards the well-being of men and community, especially around fatherhood. David Kuhl, thanks so much for joining me today. What got you into this work?

**David Kuhl:** First of all, thank you for inviting me to a conversation about fatherhood, a topic that's important to part of me, and I know it's also important to you. I think that it's somewhat of a bit of a long answer, but in terms of what got me into this, I think it probably started in my childhood in that my father suffered from mental illness. There were times in his life where he couldn't be as present as he wanted to be. I was exposed early on, in terms of the anguish of the soul when there's depression, and it certainly had an impact on me and on our family.

I think that the other parts, professionally, sequentially began when I was involved in starting the palliative care program at St. Paul's Hospital, and the Ministry of Health at that time put a condition on its funding, and that would be needed to include care for persons with HIV and AIDS. It was one of the first units in the country that provided care for those young men.

I remember vividly one of them coming to the nurse's station one evening when I was sitting there, just doing my last notes for the day, and he asked if he could use the phone, and I said, "Of course." I put the phone into a position so he could easily use it. He called his dad and he said, "Dad, I have three things to tell you. One, I need you to know that I'm gay." When he said that it was quiet, because of the proximity I could hear the silence. "Secondly", he said, "I have AIDS, Dad." Again, it was silent.

He said, "The third thing I need you to know is that I'm on a palliative care unit, which means I'm dying." No response. The silence almost seemed to be screaming at that point. The boy, although he was in his early 20s, hung up and walked to his room. I wish I'd known then what I know now, and I'll do anything to have a second chance of going to his room with him and holding him in his despair. That was part of what I decided I'd go back to school because I wanted to understand the complexities of end of life that was more than physical and the psychological and spiritual domain.

My supervisor invited me to help him develop a program for men in the military and in transition to civilian life, and so we did that. Mostly it focused on trauma, but after they had focused on trauma, the most common question was, "Can you help me be a good Dad?" There were a couple of seeds that were planted in terms of beginning to ask the question, what is it about fathers and fatherhood that's so significant? The third significant feature happened when I was on sabbatical, wondering whether I would actually put my stethoscope down to explore programs of fatherhood, masculinity.

I read a book by Lynne Twist called *The Soul of Money*. She described the story of three women who attended the 1995 Beijing Congress for women, one of them from Delhi, one from Bosnia, and one from Guatemala. They had all been seriously injured, one burnt because her dowry wasn't enough for her husband. Another one that had been raped 15 times by men, impregnated, and she decided that she would keep the child and love it unconditionally despite the fact that it belonged to the enemy.

The third one, witnessed the death of all of her pets, animals, and her family, other than her husband because she would not tell the enemy where her husband was hiding. She didn't know. I was reading that on my sabbatical, and I remember clearly, I was weeping because all of those women suffered because of the men they met in their lives. It was the deciding factor for me that I decided, "We needed to do something." Those are very extreme and severe stories, but nevertheless, I decided it was time to actively look at what can we do to enhance the integrity and well-being of men. A long answer to your question.

**Santa:** Thank you for that. It really illustrates how important it is to be a good father from very different contexts. Let's talk a little bit about Adverse Childhood Experiences or ACEs, just so that we're all on the same page, and how does this tie in with your work on fatherhood?

**David:** Great question. Adverse Childhood Experiences is based on a study that was done on 17,000 individuals who are adults, looking back at their lives, and what illnesses did they experience, what mental illnesses did they experience as adults, and what were the conditions of their childhood in terms of their homes. What they began to realize and appreciate that children that grew up in homes where there was adversity, addiction, incarceration, violence, mental illness, the children all experienced more morbidity, more illness, and disease, and many of them also died at earlier ages.

They began to look at it more closely and put a score to Adverse Childhood Experiences, and began to appreciate that the higher the score, the more likely a child is- it's not absolutely cause and effect by the strong association. The higher the score, the more likely the child would be to suffer from more illness and possibly also die at an earlier age.

**Santa:** Tell me a bit about Promundo, and how Blueprint builds on their work.

**David:** Promundo is an organization that's been in existence for over 20 years. In fact, they just today or yesterday, released their document on the State of Fatherhood in the World 2021. It started off in Brazil, in the Congo, Portugal, and in the United States, looking at what would need to be put in place to understand men in the context of domestic violence and violence against women.

Their goal is to understand all of the contributing features, and then to look at organizations and programs that can be developed to work against those with the intent always to strive toward equality, inclusion, and to diminish and eliminate domestic and violence against women.

**Santa:** What a remarkable initiative. How do you think fatherhood can shape the world?

**David:** In terms of the adverse features that go on in the world, more of them are initiated and maintained by men than by women. What we also know is that boys, men tend to fashion their behavior after their fathers. Girls tend to pattern their relationships with other men after their fathers. It's not just what fathers say, it's as much what fathers do.

If we, as fathers, decided that we wanted to promote goodness, kindness, and empathy in the world, it would change the world, and if we decided that what we believe is essential that we're protectors and providers, if we would provide safe environments, and provide environments where not just our homes, but communities were safe, it would change the world.

**Santa:** I absolutely believe that and that's why I got into a conversation with you, and I'm so supportive of what you do. We're both fathers, let me ask you, how has your work changed your ideas about how to be a father? Or maybe it's the other way around, how has being a father shaped your work?

**David:** I think it's both, and even more closely, we both have two daughters, mine are likely older than yours. I decided I wouldn't do this work unless I was in a loving relationship with those two women, because I think that the proof is in the pudding and it needs to start at home. I think one of the most revealing moments for me was the moment that I recognize that my father was absent at times because of his mental illness and the severe depression that he experienced, so that had an effect on me. One day, I realized that I too was absent, in terms of an emotional presence with regard to my daughters, because I was being the great and glorious physician on the palliative care unit. As you do know, there's enough suffering in the world for all of us, and we won't address it all.

In that moment, recognize it was a similar experience for them potentially, as it was for me and I decided in that moment, that I would be a present father, not just providing for them financially, but providing for them in a way that only I could, emotionally and physically, spiritually, and that it can't happen just with deciding this is going to be the moment where it's quality time. It meant I had to be more available more of the time because quantity only inserts itself into the quantity.

I've never regretted that. They are two of my favorite people in the world and they continue to now challenge me in my perspectives, in my use of language, in my use of my understanding of inclusivity. They keep me up to date and push me to do this work and be ever more relevant to the world as it is today.

**Santa:** You've obviously-- it sounds like become a better human being because you've spent more quality time with them. Did they notice that you've changed over the years? That you've become more devoted?

**David:** Absolutely. The older one, probably more than the younger one, because she was about four, the younger one was about four when I had that insight, the other one was eight or nine. They also realize that I need that I asked for help. I did seek therapy because I recognize that the impact of the home I grew up in had on me.

They have said numerous times they thanked me for the work I've done because they also realize that features of how we grew up are passed on from generation to generation and they thank me for stopping some of that and investing in them as girls and now as young women. Yes, they've seen me change and they've also seen me struggled to keep up with all of their new ideas and their exciting ideas. Sometimes they move faster than I do, but they've certainly expressed their gratitude.

**Santa:** Well, that's a wonderful story. Let me ask you. Are you worried that somebody might be critical of your focus on men, this binary scheme and there might be people who think that men are already very privileged and what would you say to that?

**David:** First of all, I would thank the person for the question and the concern, we have it as well. We recognize that the three founders, the co-founders of the Blueprint are cisgender males, we're white, and that we have privilege. We also realize that people with privilege often don't see all of that privilege. We would say that we've taken that into serious consideration, and we continue to do so that we initially named ourselves a men's initiative and realized it wasn't in our best interest, partly because TMI stands for Traditional Masculine Ideology and psychology literature and that's the very thing we're seeking to work against.

We're striving to work toward a post-patriarchal existence, and that our work isn't exclusive to men, we want to be all-inclusive, want to work with non-binary and we do that with regard to our work with firefighters, we work with female firefighters, female police officers, we're doing a project now in leaders in business and work with men and women. And at the same time, we realize that men are hurting, and hurts people hurts people. If we want to begin to address how we can stop the hurt so that it will also not be transmitted, because if hurt isn't transformed, it is transmitted. We realized that's where we wanted to start. It's not where we're going to end our hope that we end. I hope that answers your question.

**Santa:** Absolutely did. How are the current ideas about masculinity changing, do you think? Not partially because of your work, but also, just with time? Do you see those ideas about masculinity changing?

**David:** Yes, I think they're changing partly because people are simply asking the question, how has masculinity served us and how has it not served us and I think that for the last while, years, decades, perhaps, masculinity itself was almost seen in a negative light. Words like toxic masculinity, patriarchal masculine, Traditional masculinity, all those words almost became my backgrounds as German, and as when you don't have the right word for German, you just add another one, and they get longer and longer. It's almost like toxic masculinity and patriarchal masculinity are one word.

However, there's nothing inherently wrong with masculinity, is what we've done with it. I think that now in academic circles, as well as the nonacademic circles, people are really asking what is toxic masculinity? How has it contributed to harmful relationships, harmful situations and harmful relationships between fathers and their children, and what can we do to change that. I think that what I see is men are more open to expression of emotion more than just anger. They're already more involved

in their children from a children's lives from an early age. Some of them are seeking paternity leave at the time when a child is born. It's evolving into another way of being.

**Santa:** How much would you actually say that people learn how to be masculine from the examples that are in movies or on television? What role would you say Hollywood and CBC need to play in changing what it means to be masculine?

**David:** I think it's really high. There's an actor, Justin Baldoni, who's just doing a whole work on *Men Enough*, he wrote a book called *Men Enough* and he really expresses it well, because he is an actor and he says, "I'm expected to have the perfect body in terms of the biceps and the chest. I'm expected not to cry, I'm expected to have multiple sexual partners and always be able to perform, whether it's physically in fighting or whether it's sexually".

I think it's been a huge detriment to who we are rather and often the opposite, the men can also be portrayed as bumbling idiot and never know what to do with the kid who may needs a diaper change or doesn't know how to do the laundry. It's done this a great disservice with regard to who we are as people as an adult says, men who have the same capacity to care for themselves each other and their children as women do in their in who they are as humans. I think that the public image can be very distorted through movies, as you say.

**Santa:** Now, we have lots of young men at UBC and they're still forming into two men and adult men, and some might say that they're pretty well on their way to developing their own masculinity, but they're pretty young, 17, or 18-year-olds. Do you see UBC doing things in different settings, say in athletics, or in the classroom, or in residence halls, to help end toxic masculinity? I mean, we do have 80,000 people on campus, and almost half of them are men, and many of them are young men. Do we have an opportunity here to be a place where we try to do better, and then perhaps share that with other institutions around the world?

**David:** Thank you for the question. It actually excites me in terms of UBC, and what's happening at UBC. Just in terms of the brief history that we have at Blueprint, we conducted a design sprint in the state a few years ago, where we invited coaches, university professional athletes, to a one-day meeting of what could we do if we were to introduce concepts of what does it mean to be a good person, a good man into the athletic world. Jeremy Gunn, who is the coach for the soccer team at Stanford, called us and says, "Come to Stanford, we'd love to have you start here. One of our models is never about you without you. We interviewed 10 of the 23 soccer players, asked him if we could have an iterative development program iteratively", but it would be a program of involvement, and we would want to measure the outcome.

We did that and it really had to do with who am I as a man, who am I with regard to intimacy, with regard to consent, with regard to being a good person, a good brother. It was very favorably received and subsequently we did similar programs at West Point Military Academy in New York, and it started at University of Oregon just before COVID. With that, we came to our own backyard, perhaps is where we should have started, and fortunately, we've been now working with the athletic department,

starting with the football team. We adapted the program we had at the American universities to be a virtual program.

We always measure the programs of the outcome, so we want to make sure that it changes their attitudes toward consent, towards being a good person, good man. What does it mean to act outside save the man box, its strict definitions of traditional masculinity. It has been very well received and I understand that the athletic director for UBC has invited us to develop the program for all the male athletes on campus. That, as far as we know, is unique. The programs addressing these issues aren't unique because many universities -and Stanford would be one of them- have programs for new students, but they're often lectures.

One of the things that the male athletes have told us as they've valued the program, because they're integrated into conversations. They're guided into how to have conversations about difficult and challenging topics. At Stanford, one of them said to me, "How would you talk to a girl if you're asking her for consent?" We could actually do some role-playing and talk about values. That's being what's appreciated. That's now the program we look to develop, and again it's iterative, we will evaluate each one to make sure we're delivering what we intend to deliver.

If it is then demonstrated to be effective with athletes, we would offer it to other features and components of working on campus at UBC. As far as we know, there are no campuses in North America that are taking that kind of a dialogue approach to addressing the issues of race, of sexuality, sexual consent. What does it mean to be a good person other than a strong athlete.

**David:** Thank you. I'm really, really thrilled that you're here at UBC and that you're working on these projects here at UBC, and that I want to do everything I can to be supportive of you, to impact these young men so that they can become non-toxic and nurturing fathers and husbands in the future. Thank you so much, David, for being with the *Blue & Goldcast* today. Thank you very much.

**David:** Thank you kindly.

**Santa Ono:** David, thanks so much for being on *Blue & Goldcast* today. Dr. David Kuhl is with the department of family practice in our faculty of medicine. You can find out more about Blueprint the organization we discussed today @Blueprint.ngo. That does it for this month's episode. You can find links to our guests work as well as previous additions of this show @blueandgoldcast.com. You can also find us on your favorite podcast app, like apple music or Stitcher. If you want to get in touch, you can tweet me at UBCPress, that's pres with a set I'm Santa Ono. Thanks for listening.