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**SEVEN DAYS**

VERMONT'S ALTERNATIVE WEBWEEKLY

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At UVM, Former NFL Star Addresses "Being a Man"**VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN (11.15.06)**

BURLINGTON — When former National Football League star Don McPherson asked a group of University of Vermont students if they remembered the story of James Byrd Jr., the black man in Jasper, Texas, who was dragged to death behind a truck in 1998, nearly everyone in the room nodded their heads. But as McPherson pointed out, four times a day — 1460 times per year — a woman is murdered by a man in the United States, and yet we don't acknowledge that level of violence as a nationwide epidemic.

"Blacks are 12 percent of the population. One black man is dragged by a truck and we turned it into a national conversation," he says. "Women are 52 percent of the population, and we don't even talk about it." Every two years, 2920 women die at the hands of men. "On September 11, 2001, that many people were murdered and we went to war."

McPherson, who spoke Monday to about 80 students in Ira Allen Chapel as part of UVM's "Men's Awareness Week," isn't suggesting that Americans respond to this ongoing epidemic of violence with more violence. But he is saying that until men collectively recognize that they are the perpetrators and victims of more than 90 percent of the violent crimes, the bloodletting will continue. To address this problem, McPherson says, men must start talking to one other about what it *really* means to be a man.

McPherson, 41, knows all too well the cultural norms and stereotypes that reinforce our narrow definitions of masculinity: toughness, bravery, stoicism and sexual promiscuity. He comes from a profession that's often lauded as the pinnacle of maleness. In the mid-1980s, McPherson played quarterback at Syracuse University, where he won more than 18 national player-of-the-year honors. From 1988 to 1994, McPherson played pro football for the Philadelphia Eagles, the Houston Oilers and two teams in the Canadian Football League.

Since then, however, the former Heisman Trophy runner-up has been working on a different kind of offensive playbook — taking a proactive approach to male violence. McPherson is founder and executive director of the Sports Leadership Institute at Long Island's Adelphi University, where he creates programs for high school and college students to address issues of self-esteem, substance abuse and violence prevention.



DON MCPHERSON

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And More!

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McPherson sees many similarities between how America responds to substance abuse and how it responds to male-perpetrated violence. In both cases, he says, the answer has often been to resort to scare tactics — “This is your brain, this is your brain on drugs” — or terse, simplistic slogans such as “Just say no” to drugs and “Just wait” to have sex.

“We tell you that sex is dirty, it’ll cause unwanted pregnancies and STDs and HIV,” McPherson says. “But at the same time, we tell you to ‘Save it for the one you love.’ Think about that for a second.”

Likewise, America’s response to male violence is often shrouded in simplistic explanations and euphemisms. When teenaged boys shoot up a high school cafeteria or gun each other down in drive-by shootings, we label it “school violence,” “teen violence” and “gang violence.” Calling such an incident “a Columbine-like event” sanitizes it even further.

“We don’t call it what it is,” McPherson says: “male hate.”

Compounding the problem is a culture that celebrates youthful sexuality but is squeamish about discussing sexual violence. McPherson notes that when he first began traveling around the country and talking to young people about sexual harassment, sexual assault and date rape, he didn’t know that the woman he was dating at the time had once been drugged and gang-raped herself. “And the reason I didn’t know this,” he says, “is because these are issues we’re raised not to talk about.”

At the heart of the problem, McPherson explains, is that men confine themselves, and each other, in a “very narrow box” that defines their masculinity. This acculturation process starts at a very early age. McPherson recalls how, while walking through an airport recently, he saw a mother make her 4-year-old son stop crying by telling him to “be a man.”

“The problem is, we don’t raise boys to be men,” he says. “We raise them to *not* be women or gay men.”

Such attitudes become so deeply ingrained in the male psyche that when men act out in violent and sometimes tragic ways, they are often perplexed by the response to their behavior. Recently, McPherson was invited to Duke University to speak to the school’s athletes, following the high-profile arrests in April of several lacrosse players on charges of rape and sodomy.

“Some of the guys said, ‘What did we do wrong?’ These are guys who come from some of the finest communities and finest high schools in the world,” McPherson says. “A lot of people there said, ‘This was just guys being guys.’ At what point do we begin to expect more from our men?”

Ultimately, McPherson contends that just as slavery wasn’t abolished until white people recognized it was wrong and began confronting other white people, male violence against women will not end until men stop labeling it “a women’s issue” and become part of the solution.

Following his talk, several male students thanked McPherson for coming to UVM, especially in the aftermath of the Michelle Gardner-Quinn murder, and asked him for advice on ways to continue this dialogue on campus.

Though McPherson’s message wasn’t entirely groundbreaking to some people in the room, the composition of the audience was noteworthy. One UVM sophomore noted afterward that she was glad to see how many men attended the event. Sometimes, she said, it’s just a matter of “finding the right messenger.”

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