

Mankind Project Experience Reports

**A DECLARED ELDER—
AN EXPERIENCE REPORT OF THE MANKIND PROJECT**

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I have been sober and free from drugs and alcohol for over 28 years, and for the first 14 years I had a high quality of sobriety because I was active with a group of men in recovery where I had great relationships. In 1998, I had to relocate for my job and lost my support groups; this led me into a depression. In 2002, I lost my job and moved to Michigan where I was able to find a new job; but, all I did was to work, sleep, and use TV as my great escape. By December 2011 when I had time off from work during the Christmas shutdown, I hit an emotional bottom: I could no longer live the life I had created for myself. I had descended into a dark and miserable place. In my desperation, I started attending multiple meetings of the 12-step programs for recovery of alcohol and the dysfunction of codependency; I still attend many of these meetings weekly.

At one meeting during that initial Christmas break, I told a man that I wanted to find a group of men in recovery where I could build relationships like I had had in my first 14 years of sobriety. He suggested I attend a men's peer mutual support group, which in the ManKind Project (MKP) is called an Integration Group, I-Group for short. As with 12-step programs, there are open and closed I-Group meetings. An open I-Group meeting is a chance for new members to learn about the ManKind Project. Once a man goes through the New Warrior Training Adventure (NWTa)—a 48-hour intensive experience—he is able to attend any closed I-Group meeting.

After I attended the first open I-Group, I was accepted into the closed group even though I had not yet attended the New Warrior Training Adventure. There was a wonderful variety of men in the group—men who were self employed,

retired, teachers, executives, engineers, and blue collar workers. Educational levels ranged from men who had never finished high school to men having college degrees. Some of the men were married, some divorced, some single. Judgments criticizing myself because I never finished college and always compared myself with others having a degree started to drop away and I began to trust these men even after my first meeting.

The group encouraged me to do the New Warrior Training Adventure. Liking what I experienced in the I-Group and seeing how other men in the group were more open in sharing their feelings than I, I chose to do the NWTA in June 2012 (New Warrior Training Adventures are held at least twice a year in my area). In that 48-hour weekend they helped me to face my fears and to first trust the men taking the training and build a strong bond with them. The NWTA weekend was the catalyst that brought me back to life.

I remember returning home that Sunday evening after the NWTA and I apologized to my wife and told her “I’m sorry for being gone for so long.” By that I meant that I had been gone emotionally from my marriage and other relationships for a long time. Since then my relationships with my wife, family, friends, and my boss have been improving. I was learning to recognize and express my needs and to ask for what I needed. My communication with my wife and family improved as I was able to communicate in a more open and frequent manner. At work, my boss commented on how I was easier to work with and that my behavior was more mature.

After having attended an “Elders” (50 and over) gathering one evening in October, I came home energized about finding my elder energy. When I told my wife about an elder weekend that was meeting in Windsor/Detroit in November, she encouraged me to go. She even handed me a check for the registration. I was filled with joy, love, gratitude, and blessed by this gift that God and the ManKind Project had given me.

Before the MKP-Windsor/Detroit Elder Gathering in November, I had a hard time visualizing myself as an “Elder” because I thought it meant I was used up and ready for pasture. I liked to think of myself as still being a “young buck.” I didn’t want to give that up. I also didn’t think I had anything to offer as an “Elder.” But during the weekend I heard that an “Elder” was not elderly and did not mean “old,” “washed up,” or “put out to pasture.” An “Elder” in MKP is more about wisdom—compassion, taking time instead of hurry up to get there or get it done. What a wonderful gift it was to me, to hear other men share their experience, strengths, and hopes.

Before that meeting I had never really looked at myself. I was locked into a younger image of myself. I realize now that I was afraid to confront the truth that I was in my mid-50s. After the Elder Gathering weekend, I began to face this fear and began to feel the need to grow up and act my age. I had no idea what direction my life might go as I faced my fears, but I felt that whatever

happened, it would be okay and I would have support from the other Elders whom I had met and come to trust.

The Elder Gathering started with discussions—in a circle with all the 26 men who were attending and later in small groups of a few men—that were interesting, informative, and amusing. The men ranged in age from 50 to 75. I tend to take life all too seriously and the calm and serene energy of the other Elders gave me a new direction and helped alleviate some of my fears of growing older. This was an experience I could take with me when I went home and then out into the world.

The discussion that Friday evening was an experience of inspiration and learning what wisdom was—wisdom as defined by the dictionary, by poetry, by our cultural values, by society. The best part of Friday night was the input from all the men who shared in the circle what Elder Wisdom meant to them. For example, just slowing down and not needing to rush through life and how you can get better results from doing so.

Food preparation and cleanup is done on a volunteer basis. Saturday morning I was up early and helped with making breakfast. I felt honored to serve and give back to this strong group of Elder men as each of us took turns preparing meals and cleaning up afterwards.

We then gathered in circle to talk about death and dying (gulp). The reality of dying someday had been a frightening subject for me and I had avoided giving it any thought. Needless to say, this topic was difficult for me to discuss. I got to the point of feeling safe enough to be able to share my true feelings about death and dying and after two and a half hours on this topic, we moved to a larger space in the next cabin to complete the process on death and dying. The final portion of this activity was more physical and we needed the extra space. These next exercises brought out even more of my feelings about the topic; after which, I was exhausted emotionally and physically.

Later in the evening, during the Elder Remembrance Ceremony, I was honored to hear of the names of Windsor/Detroit men who had passed on and hear as some were remembered by the men who were present and shared their memories of those departed brothers. This was an important way to honor those men who have been a big part of MKP W/D, and MKP more broadly, becoming a life line to all men around the world.

On Sunday, I made the leap and chose to become a “Declared Elder” and this has been a huge step in my transformation to my elder energy. Some men never declare themselves an elder; but, for me, it meant stepping into the responsibility to mentor others and to help point the way in a direction to change the world for the better. The ceremony was an incredible emotional experience, bringing me to tears of joy. Elders have the honor of being able to bless another man. As part of my dedication to become a “Declared Elder” I was asked to bless a man. The man I chose had been one of my first contacts for my NWTA back in June. I truly honor and love this man for what he had done for me.

I believe the Elder Gathering weekend was divine intervention at work in my life. Through the MKP process and with the love and support of my fellow Warrior Brothers, I am becoming more of the man I want to be. I wouldn't change anything about my MKP experience up to this time. Being given such a wonderful gift of feelings is hard for me to describe in words; but I show the joy with my heart, my eyes, and my incredibly large smile. And I am once again being invited to be in the lives of fellow MKP members; I once again have great relationships and a high quality of life and recovery.

As part of the Declared Elder ritual, I received a multi-colored stole as an outward sign of having become a Declared Elder. My I-Group has asked me to wear my Elder Stole during I-Group. When I put it on, it instills an energy that courses through my body; I feel more confident to be an active participant in our group's discussions and processes.

I have been growing every day due to the divine and the ManKind Project and with the wonderful Elders of Windsor/Detroit whom I love and honor! I want to pass this wonderful gift on to other men. I thank you, Brothers, for having this Elder Gathering weekend. I Honor and Bless you all.

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