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Essay #2

A High School Brotherhood

The first time I toured Marquette University High School as a prospective student, I thought I was about to spend the next four years of my life in some sort of male cult. A horde of shaggy haired polo shirts roamed the halls. Football players were captains of the mathletes. Everyone knew one another. Upper classmen hanging out with freshman? This wasn't high school; this was Mars. The guys were all so different than my friends from middle school and me. These guys seemed perfectly happy – almost too happy to be spending Monday through Friday without seeing a female other than their mothers and a few teachers.

Marquette High is an all-guys school in Milwaukee. Academically, it is one of the best, but from the naïve perspective of a fourteen year old boy, academics were not so high on the list compared to girls. My parents had said since I was born I had no other choice and that I would understand while I'm older.

“Homo High” was the nickname known throughout Milwaukee of my future high school and being one of only three guys attending Marquette High from my middle school, I was ridiculed and ashamed. My friends were worried that I would change. Near the end of my eighth grade year, lunch table conversations weren't as exciting for me as for the group attending Whitnall, the local public high school. While they built up the ideal high school experience in their minds, I was continually brought down by the inevitable “c'mon man, you can't expect you're not gonna become one of *them*.” They expected I would fall into the same cult as I had described after my first steps into Marquette High. I assured my friends I'd never change. And I

believed it too. With fourteen years under my belt I had already seen it all; I was going to stick to my roots. In the end, though, they were right.

The south side of Milwaukee, where I grew up, has a very traditional perception of the male role in society. It is still a very working class, breadwinner, don't show emotion type of mindset. The nuclear family seemed to be the only version of family people had ever heard of. Typical families had a stay at home mother, working father, and two or three kids. Small local businesses lined the streets. Everything from auto dealerships to strip malls and of course, the pubs. The majority of students attended the district high school which their parents had passed through years before them.

That mentality was handed down to the youth of the community; namely, my middle school friends and me. Male relationships needed to be somewhat distant as getting too close would be considered feminine or "gay," which is very taboo in a world of construction workers and firefighters. Looking back now, it seems silly, but at the time it meant everything.

Other perceptions of my high school were on the opposite side of the spectrum. Outsiders assumed Marquette High was one big frat house. Everyone was thought of as a cocky jock who's masculinity was marked by male dominance and elitism. The outsider's view of the typical MUHS man was a letter jacket wearing, rowdy animal with too much testosterone to handle. The idea that girls were not part of pivotal educational and social interactions gave the stereotype that guys from my school did not treat girls with respect and needed to show masculinity by taking the attitude that we were better than the rest. I didn't want any part of this. I wanted to be like my friends and have the typical high school experience.

The first day of my high school experience was full of teacher orientations, tours from senior volunteers, and freshman assemblies in the auditorium. I left school that day feeling

comfort but thinking how lame the next four years were going to be. On the car ride home, I told my mother “I bet my friends at Whitnall had a much better first day than me. Not having to make new friends, goofing off in class, meeting girls, and finding a homecoming date.” I was quick to call Steve, my best friend from middle school to get the news. As it turned out, his day wasn’t what I imagined. Instead of orientations, he was thrown to the wolves, repeatedly getting lost trying to find his classroom. The seniors volunteered, but by throwing eggs at freshman in a traditional hazing ritual. I guess my day wasn’t so bad after all.

After my freshman year at Marquette High, my mindset had already completely changed. While never losing my old friends, I had found new friends in this all male environment and was beginning to realize that the cult I had once envisioned was more of a brotherhood. It was through freshman retreat that I realized this.

When the school shut down for a March weekend, the freshman stayed behind. Over the following two days we were able to come together through service, stories, and some genuine fun. Random groups of freshman were assigned to upperclassmen leaders to head out into the community. My group met with senior citizens confined to a nursing home. While it didn’t seem like we were doing much, residents were reluctant to enjoy the company of a young face, if only for a few hours. During the ride back to school, it was easy to break down barriers between guys I’d never talked to before. Having a sense of vulnerability put everyone on the same level. Telling similar stories of freshman worries and finding connections in the unanimous conclusion that our hormones missed the female presence, but going to school with all guys wasn’t as bad as anyone imagined. All the masculinity went out the window and we weren’t worried about an image anymore.

My high school is a place where young men can learn in a very non-stereotypical setting. The relationships my friends were forming at coed schools were very different from my own. The element of female presence in fact made it much harder for my other friends to find new best friends. Groups and clicks were formed and rivalries and fights broke out. We never had any of that. There wasn't competition to look or act a certain way in front of others. We had a group effort to better ourselves and our education. It took me a while to figure out why, in an environment of over 800 guys there were never any fights, but it all came back to the sense of brotherhood. We had a sense that the guy next to you had your back in any life situation, even if you only knew his name.

The pinnacle of our brotherhood was at the Kairos retreat during our senior year. Throughout the year, a group of seniors would leave school for a week and travel to a retreat center outside of the city. My Kairos landed on a mid-November week. The first snow of the year. Kairos was similar to freshman retreat but at the next level with our peers now running the activities and discussions. Here, guys were able to share stories of life issues. Secrets most of our parents and best friends didn't even know: stories of child abuse, drug addiction, and homosexuality. It was thought to be gay in our high school was next to impossible with a masculine environment, but it was on the contrary. As it should be, homosexual students were accepted as any other student. From what I could gather, this was not the case at coed high schools where homosexuals were ridiculed and embarrassed.

The trend was changing for my old friends who once didn't understand my experience. I was part of the cult we once resented and old lunch table jokes were replaced by admiration. Though we all were still a bit naïve, the maturation process continued to broaden horizons and

see past stereotypes. They now saw the brotherhood and wanted to be a part of it, wishing they had attended the very place they once warned me of.

A few years out of high school and back in a coed environment, I have seen how attending a male only school has positively influenced my life. The friendships I made – all 284 of them – will stay for the rest of my life. Together, we learned what it really means to be a man. It isn't through dominance or a macho image that a boy becomes a man. For us, the masculinity was broken down and in its place was simple love and friendship. With all childhood friends, middle and high school, I can comfortably give hugs as greetings rather than a high five.