WHAT MARES A NAN?

Exploring masculine identity at The Totteridge Academy





PHOTOGRAPHY BY BARBARA PREMO

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What makes a man? This was the question we posed to a group of year 8 boys at the Totteridge Academy in North London. This book is the product of our exploration into unpacking and answering this question with them. The question, as I'm sure most readers will agree, is not an easy one to answer, for adults or for young people. Living in such high-speed and complex times, where cultural norms and expectations are constantly shifting and coming into conflict with well-established and deeply entrenched ideas around gender and identity can make the task of understanding ones identify in terms of gender very challenging indeed.

Sadly, there are still many negative aspects of masculine identity which can be seen in the behaviour of men at all levels of our society; from the playground to the workplace and, indeed, from our supposed leaders. We wanted to provide these young men with the space to explore the topic of masculinity at a time in their lives when they are already beginning to make crucial decisions about the kind of men they want to be. At FBB it is our firm belief that we have a responsibility to have this discussion with young men and to help them to explore the different, more positive, masculine identities that are available to them.

We started by unpacking what was meant by the term 'masculinity' and then by exploring where our ideas about masculinity come from, before moving on to building an understanding of how these ideas can shape our identity, values and behaviour – sometimes without us even being aware of it. We adopted a co-creative approach where we as FBB workers joined the young people on their voyage of discovery into what it means to be a man and did our best to refrain from providing 'answers' or trying to elicit 'right' or 'wrong' responses from the young people; instead preferring to investigate and ask questions together to move towards a clearer understanding of how some aspects of masculine identity can have negative consequences on our own lives and the lives of those around us.

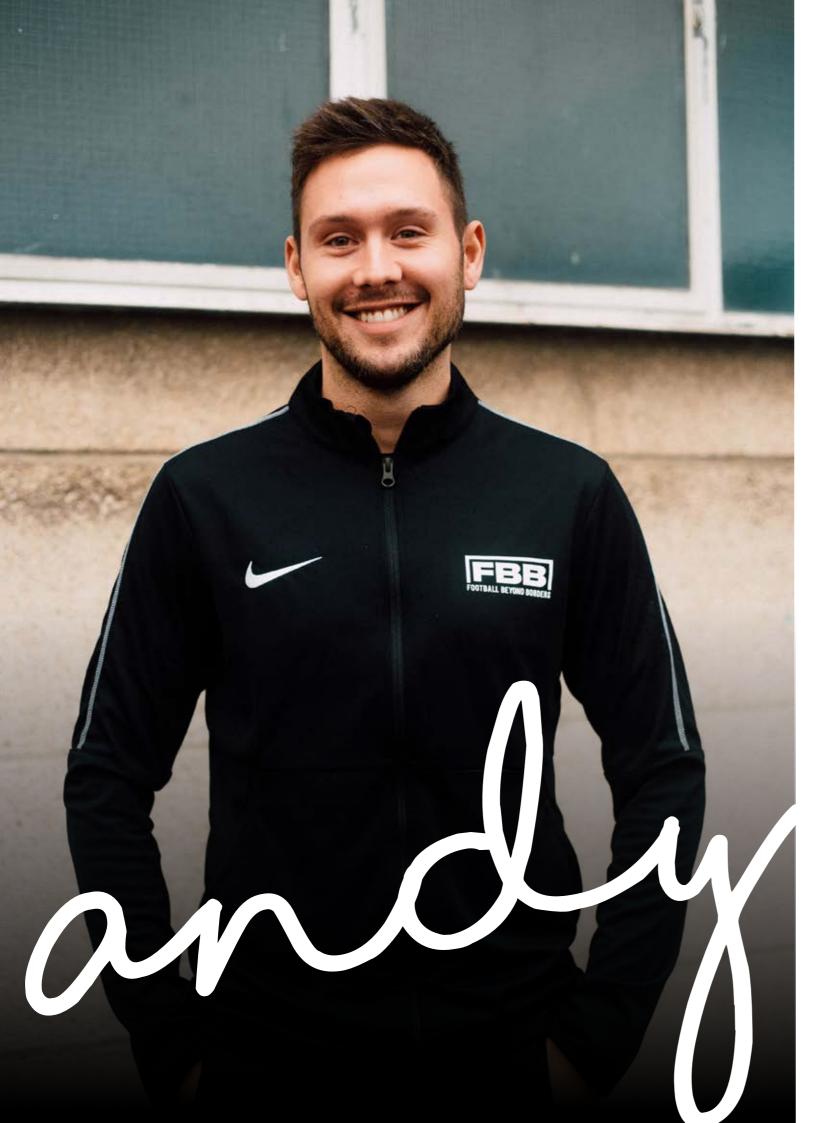
As we moved through the program, the group arrived at some incredibly perceptive insights into how their own lives had already been affected by society's shared ideas around masculinity, and how they both consciously and subconsciously pass on or uphold the messages they have imbued from their social world to their own peers - thus helping keep these messages alive. Ultimately, the boys were able to draw on the very best of both their own and their peer's qualities, values and beliefs. They also drew inspiration from other influential male role models in their lives and in the public eye to arrive at an understanding of the elements they believe constitute the kind of men that they aspire to be.

To say that working with these remarkable young men has been a pleasure would be an understatement. Every early Tuesday morning start has been a treasure that myself, Harry and Bayo have greatly looked forward to. Their willingness to look at themselves openly and to share their thoughts and emotions as well as their bravery and desire to grow, learn and take responsibility for their own futures and the future of the world they inhabit is testament to the best of young men that we should champion and be proud of.

Please enjoy this book as it takes you through the boy's journey of exploring what makes a man.

STEFAN IMESON

Project lead Football Beyond Borders



Working with FBB has been an absolute privilege. This is primarily down to the warm, supportive and nurturing environment that the team have offered our students. The issues surrounding masculinity and masculine identity are both current and pressing. It is becoming increasingly important that we tackle these issues in school to give our young men the best start in life and to avoid potential disengagement in the future.

The programme has served as a platform, whereby the students can develop their skills, as well as learning how to be better communicators. With the state of men's mental health in crisis, this will be of significant benefit to them. The simple art of talking about your problems, in a healthy way, is imperative and must be addressed nationwide. To watch the journey the boys have been on has been a thing of beauty. The change and confidence in them is tangible and they are now passing the torch; delivering assemblies to the rest of the year group and setting an example for local primary schools.

I cannot thank Stefan, Harry and the FBB team enough.

ANDY MCGREGOR

Director of Learning for Year 8 The Totteridge Academy



When I was growing up in school I was not educated about masculinity. What I liked about this project was being able to see the young people grow and get educated about a topic they had previously not heard of. Through this project they were able to see beyond the stereotypes that they feel society expects them to conform to.

The young people benefited from this project as they were able to become more open minded, to understand that crying or being hurt is not a sign of weakness but actually a sign of strength. The fact that they can show their emotions and know that their peers are able to comfort them and vice versa is powerful. They are now more aware of how to treat woman as equals and why this is so important. We at FBB are not only trying to help the boys be good men, we're trying to help them be good people.

I learned from this project that even though I am emotional and I can admit, I try to hide behind my own masks sometimes and show the people around me that I am not fazed by anything. However, I am emotional and I do cry and maybe the mask hurts me more, the more I wear it. The best thing about this project is that it teaches the boys to be comfortable with staying true to themselves.

I believe that what makes a man is the ability to always show respect and know that even if someone crosses the line we don't have to fight back. We can lead by example and show other men that there are other ways to solve disputes. Real men treat women equally; we're all humans. For me, being a man means trying to be a role model to the young people I work with. I strive to always be myself and not worry about what society thinks; they'll either love you for who you are or dislike you for who you're trying to be. Being a man means being able to feel pain and express that pain but also being able to go beyond it and support other men through the same struggles.

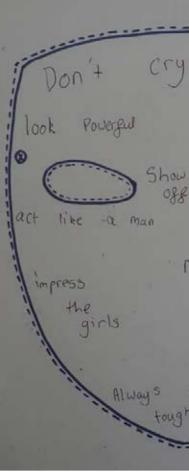
HARRY GANESHKUMAR

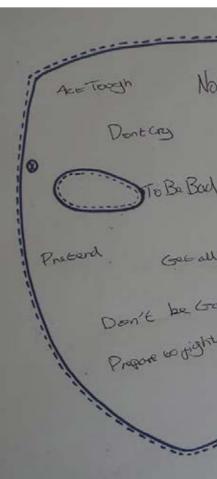
Project Lead Football Beyond Borders



THE MASK YOU LIVE IN

We started by unpacking the term 'masculinity' and discussing the 2015 documentary 'The Mask You Live In', which follows young men in American schools as they navigate the journey from boyhood to manhood, struggling to stay true to themselves whilst feeling the pressure to conform to narrow masculine stereotypes. Despite being focused on the experiences of American school boys, many of the pressures the young men identified resonated with the Totteridge boys. This made for a rich session in which we discussed the various 'masks' we all wear on a day-to day basis and the things these masks might be covering up. The group, including project leads, wrote down the various things we felt that we presented to people to ensure that we were seen as 'manly' and accepted by our peer groups on paper masks, using the back of the masks to write down the parts of our personality that we didn't always show to others. This then lead to a discussion on the many similarities between our masks and some group sharing around the difficult emotional states elicited by this covering up our more authentic selves. Following are some examples of masks which captured much of the feeling in the room at this early stage of the project.





Don't be gay never CEL act Noemotion

0 Get all the girls



SAYS WHO?

Next, the boys looked at different images of men in the media. After discussing the various pressures that young men face to conform to limiting and narrow masculine identities, we wanted to get the boys to think about where these messages about masculinity come from.

We spent a session looking at various portrayals and images of men in the media as well as in popular music videos that they were interested in order to help them make these connections.

The following are comments made by the boys in this session:

- "Men in the media always look muscular, you never see men who are like normal size ... "
- "Men in these images are surrounded by pretty women... its like, that's a real man right? If you get all the girls."
- "The men in the music videos show off their money and their girls. They want to let people watching know they are serious and not scared of anyone"
- "There's women in the images but somehow they look less than the men. less powerful".
- "They are all good looking and hench. It's a lot to live up to".

We went on to discuss how these images can become embedded in our collective consciousness and inform a lot of our views about masculinity and about women. The boys made links with the imbalance of power between men and women and the objectification of women often seen in the media and how boys in their own age group sometimes spoke about and treated girls. They were also able to see how many of their ideas about masculinity concerned with the 'acquisition' of women had been influenced by music videos and other forms of media. At this point we started to see some attitudinal shifts. As one of our young men said at this stage;

"It's made me realise that we need to treat women more equally. They aren't objects just there for us, they have their own lives and their own rights".

GENDER STEREOTYPING

We wanted the boys to explore the concept of gender stereotypes in further depth, and what better place to start than by looking at clips from Disney films. We spent a session looking at clips and images from Disney films which expressed very traditional gender norms and stereotypes and then moved on to discussing how these gender norms impact our perception of ourselves as men and women as we grow up.

The boys were shocked when they unpicked the explicit and implicit messages in these clips and saw just how narrow and limiting the portrayals of male and female characters were. We assigned different groups with different Disney characters and asked them to think about the gender stereotypes that they supported and how these might impact young viewers. The following extracts are taken from their group presentations.



"Gaston treats Belle like she is a prize to be won. He is big, tall and strong. Sometimes he intimidates the women in the film using his size. He is also really cocky and thinks that everyone loves him. Most of the girls in his village like him other than Belle. Gaston shows that men should be muscular and cocky and treat women as objects and most women will still like him anyway because he is 'manly'".

AND PEDRO



"Hercules is shown as a big, muscular man. He can fight and seems to be not afraid of anything or anyone. Young children who see characters like this get an idea that this is how men should be. Maybe when they grow older they think they are less than manly if they aren't like him."

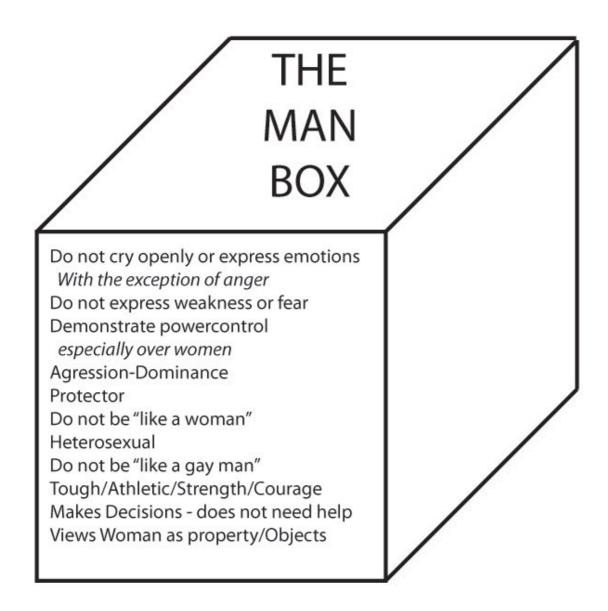
TOMMY, GUI, ZAM AND PEDRO

"Cinderella is skinny and blonde so she is quite stereotypically 'pretty'. She is a delicate woman and needs to be saved my men. This would give young people who watch it the idea that women can be helpless and are mainly there to be pretty and glamorous. Maybe this is why young girls want to look like princesses when they are little"

LUIZ, TJ AND ADAM

TOMMY, GUI, ZAM

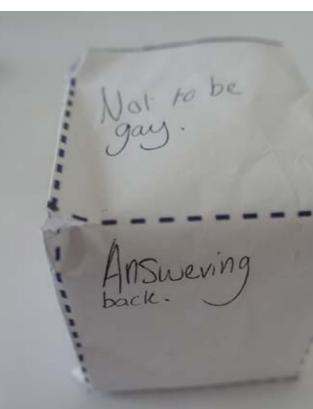




Tony Porter's 'Man Box', taken from his TedTalk 'A Call to Men'



THE MAN BOX



Before moving on to looking at positive masculinity and male role models we wanted to return to the theme of the collective socialisation of men in society and ensure that the boys had a solid understanding of this complex process. The boys had shown such a keen interest in sharing their own experiences of the pressures they felt to conform to narrow and limiting masculine stereotypes and were clearly intrigued by how common and similar these feelings and experiences were among the group. Tony Porter's TedTalk, 'A Call to Men', uses the imagery of 'the man box' to explain the concept of the collective socialisation that men experience in modern western societies. Before we got to the part in the video where Tony outlines the things he believes constitutes this collective socialisation, we paused the video and asked the boys to write down the unspoken and sometimes explicit rules or 'codes' that they felt they had to follow to fit inside this 'man box' onto a 3D box cut out that they would later construct (see above). On the left is the slide used by Tony Porter in his talk. The following pages show the deconstructed boxes of the boys on the project, taken apart in order for the reader to see the all of their ideas. Notice how many similarities there are between the two, suggesting the universality of this experience and how pervasive these ideas are...

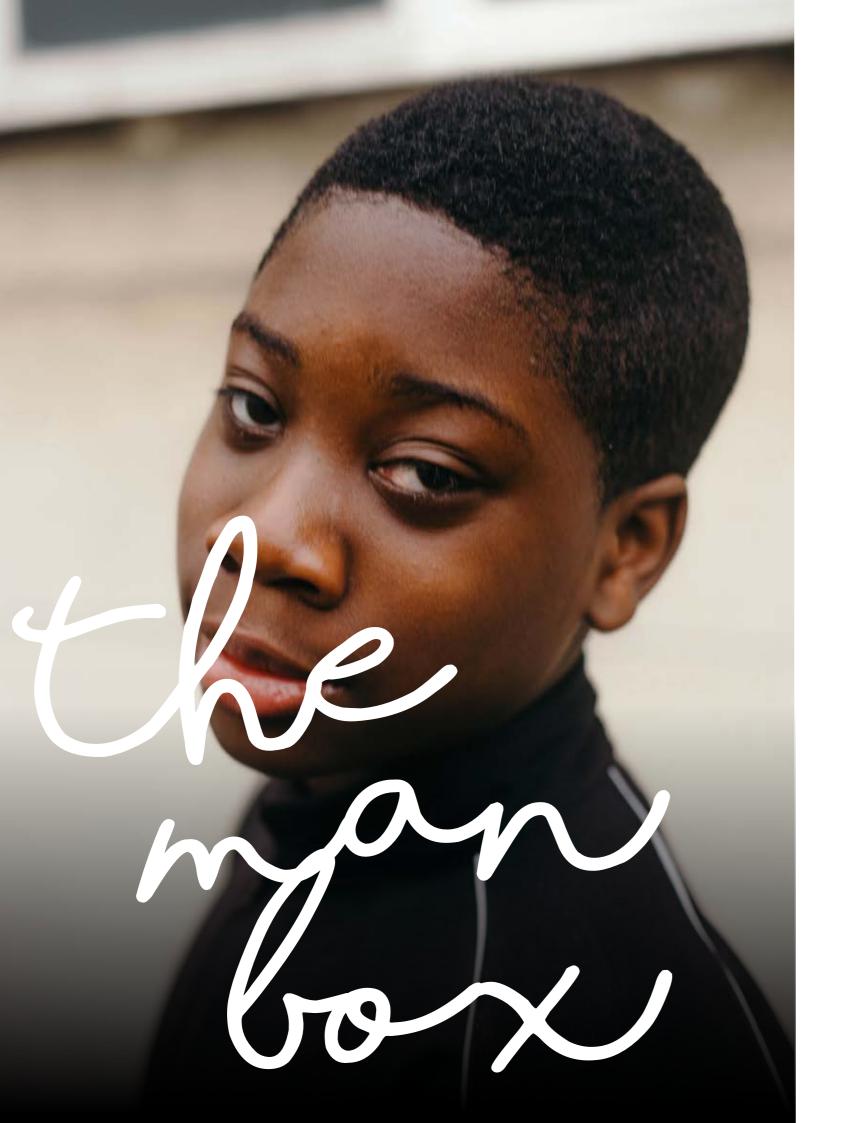
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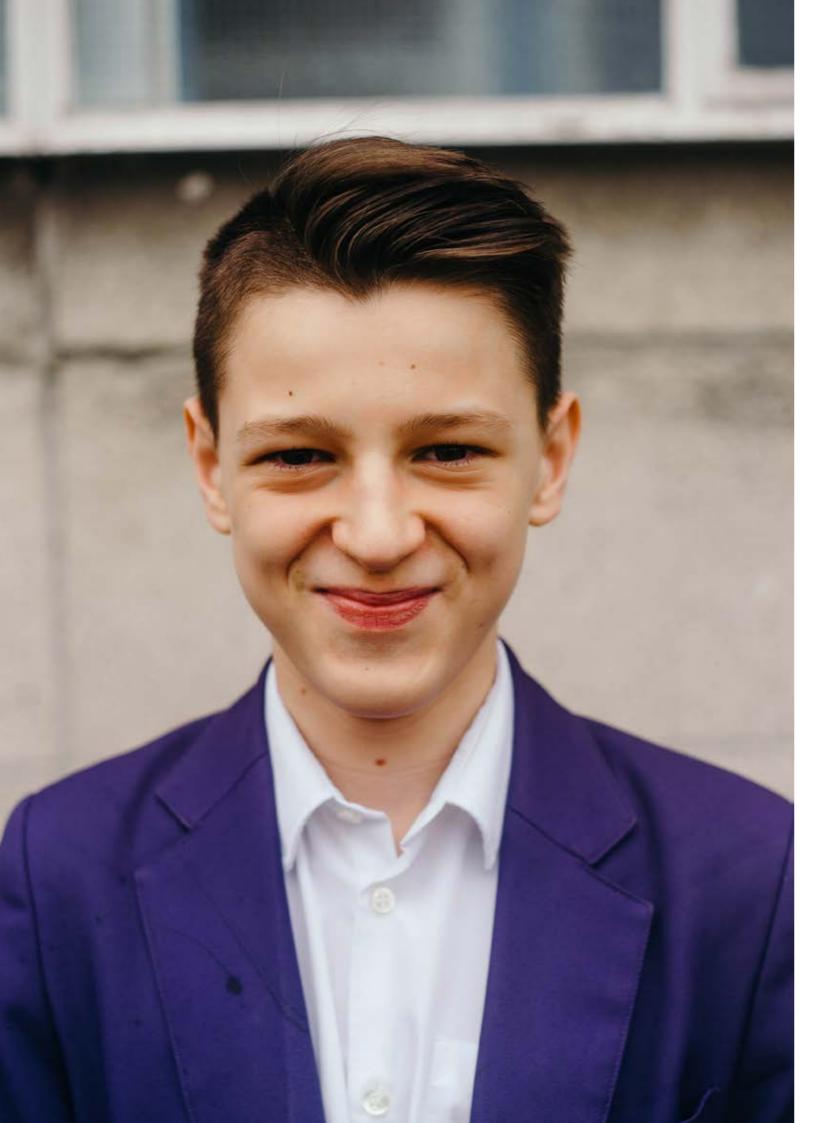
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THE MAN BOX - POEMS

Despite the large amount of time we gave to exploring this section of the topic, it still felt that there was more that the boys wanted to express. After the previous session, one of our FBB staff members used the words from his own 'man box' to write a poem which he shared with the group. The boys liked the idea of expanding on what was clearly a real area of interest and we decided that the chance to be creative at this stage would be an important way for the boys to connect with the work on a deeper level. We have included a selection of poems written by the boys, displayed next to their portraits in the following pages. The poems are short but revealing, and for some of the boys represent a real willingness to open up in a way which is sometimes seen as taboo for young men of their age.



THE MAN BOX BY MCKENZIE REID

My man box keeps me inside Inside a space where you can't be gay And can't show anyone any emotion

My man box gets me into fights I don't want to be in the box I just want to be me



IN THIS BOX BY TAHMID MIAH

In my man box It kills me In my man box It feels weird

But the one thing I'm saying is... Am I man enough?

My friends think I'm tough My friends think I'm rich But when I'm away from my mother I could cry to bits

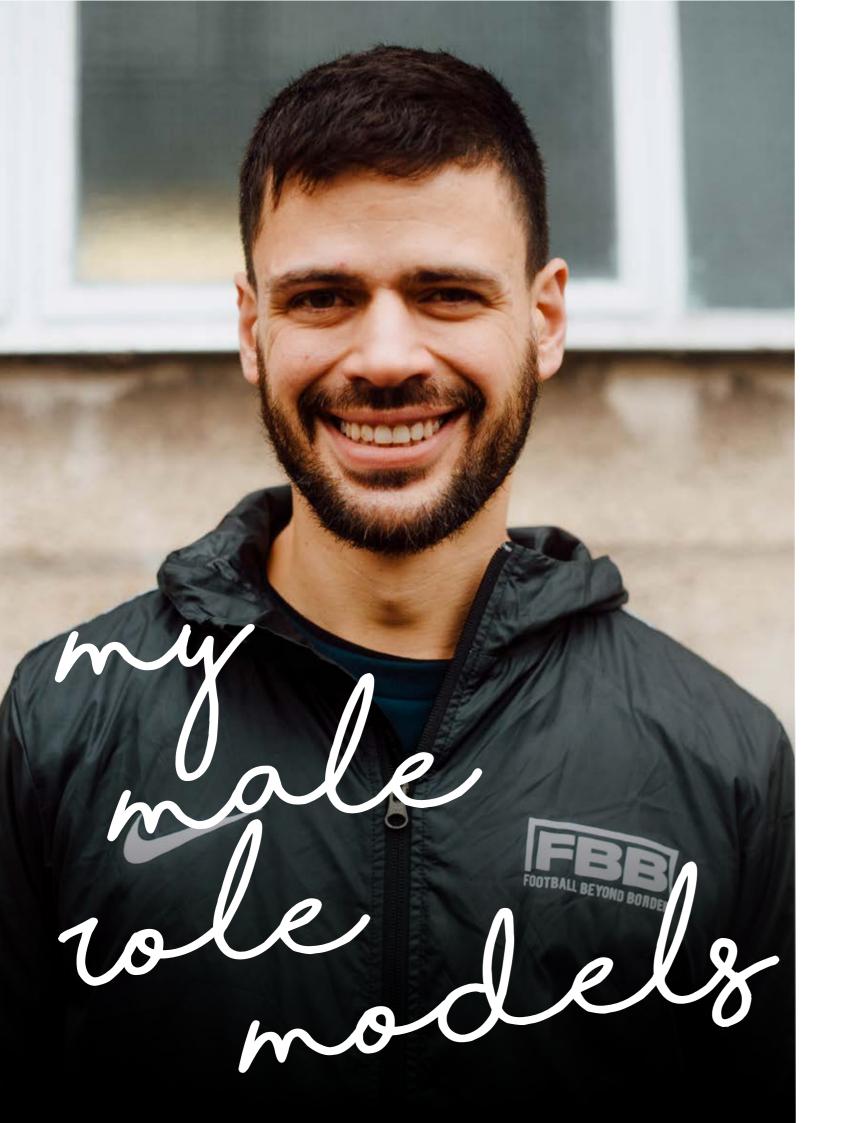
If I don't break the rules If I don't break the law Will I be seen as weak?



THE BOX **BY CHARLIE HILL**

This box is really intimidating It's really, really threatening Pretending to do bad things Pretending to have 'side tings' To show people you're not gay Because the MAN BOX is intimidating

This man box makes me get into fights It makes me give people frights It always makes me answer back Now that one is a fact Being funny is a threat Because if you say the wrong thing you lose friends



Having spent the beginning of the project looking at the more negative aspects of masculine identity and the pressures to conform to problematic masculine stereotypes, we started to speak to the boys about the positive male role models in their lives and about what they saw as alternative, more positive and healthy ways of being 'manly'. The boys spoke to us about the importance of men being 'responsible', 'providing for their families', 'protecting those around them' and of 'earning good money'. Whilst these were certainly more positive values and behaviours than those we had looked at before, they still seemed fairly traditional and tied in with stereotypical gender norms i.e. men as providers and protectors of women and women as in need of being looked after by men.

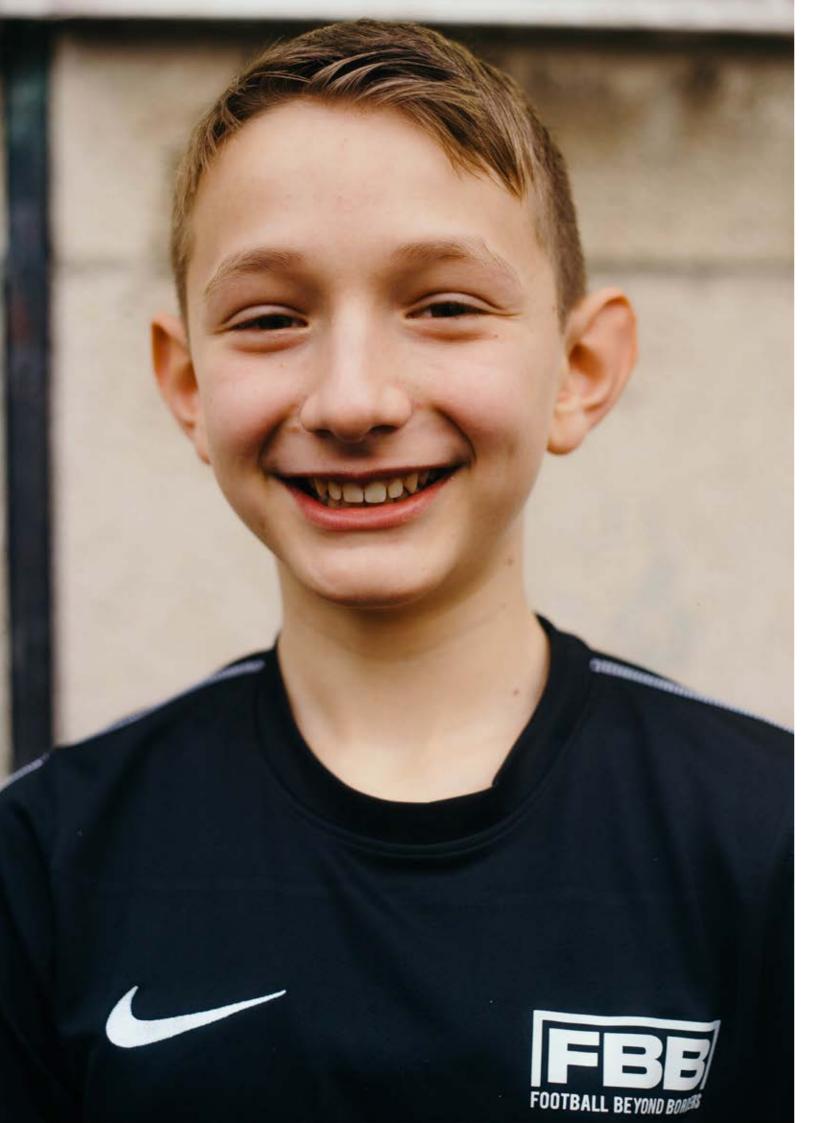
We asked the boys to go further than this and to think about how some men defied the gender norms that we had been exploring and still managed to be male role models that they could look up to. We put the boys in groups and gave them a list of potential men to research and present back on. They also had the option to include family members or friends they felt inspired by and who they thought challenged the more stereotypical and problematic aspects of masculinity we had been exploring. Though the boys worked in groups, each group selected one 'speech writer' to write a short piece on their chosen man. The following pages present a selection of these speeches.



BY FERNANDO SONCO

Danny Rose is a role model because he challenges male stereotypes by showing his feelings and thoughts. He did this when he publically stated that he was going through a battle with anxiety and depression in 2018. This is an example of a great male role model as he is almost giving a light of courage and guidance to young men like me who are also going through anxiety and depression.

Danny Rose has done this to show that men can also have feelings and thoughts and not be scared to express them. He has anxiety because of the triple trauma of his uncle committing suicide, his mother being racially abused and someone shooting at his brother outside of his family home. During his battle with depression he was often unable to get out of bed and was on medication for weeks. But, he persevered and used the support he had around him after speaking out and his career playing football to get past his stress and depression and has become the amazing football player and role model he is today.



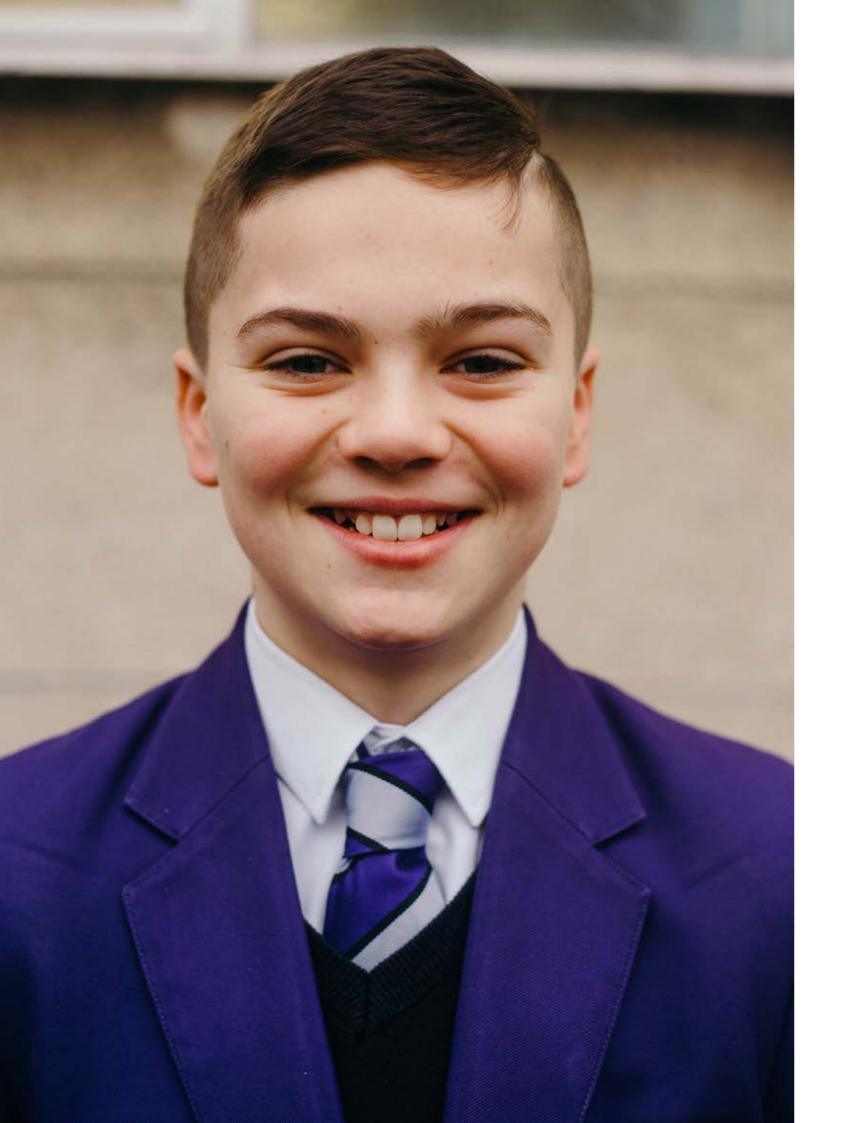
BY LUIZ CAUSHI

I have a lot of male role model for lots of different reasons but the one that stands out is my dad. The reason he stands out is because he started from not having a lot to pouring his heart and soul into working hard and accomplishing his goals. He stands out from the masculine stereotype because most people think of male role models being fit and going to the gym a lot and have massive amounts of money but my dad is not all of those things but is still my role model that sits right at the top of my role model list. He takes responsibility and is caring and kind.

Another one of my male role models is Cristiano Ronaldo. This is because he always persevered even when he had obstacles in his way. When Ronaldo was 12 he went on a three-day trial with Sporting CP, who signed him for a fee of £1,500. However, at just age 15, he was diagnosed with a condition which could have forced him to give up football, known as racing heart or tachycardia which is when your resting heart rate is over 100BPM for adults. However, Ronaldo underwent a heart surgery and went on to play in the Premier League for Manchester United. Ronaldo is my role model also because he doesn't care about the negative comments people might have and he doesn't react to problems with anger and aggression like some men might do.

"Your love makes me strong, your hate makes me unstoppable."

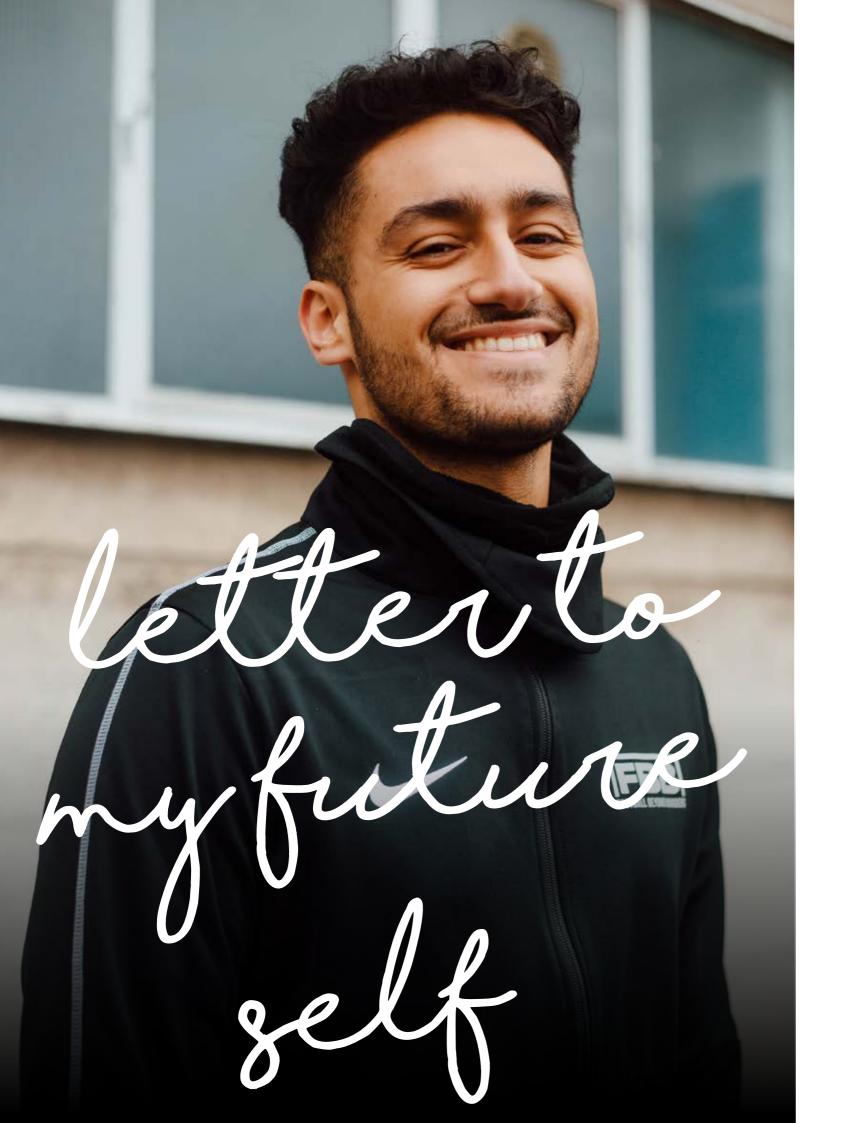
- Cristiano Ronaldo



BY LOUIE PROUD

My male role model is Barack Obama because he was the first ever black American president and he was always stating influential and inspirational guotes such as "We, the People, recognize that we have responsibilities as well as rights; that our destinies are bound together; that a freedom which only asks what's in it for me, a freedom without a commitment to others, a freedom without love or charity or duty or patriotism, is unworthy of our founding ideals, and those who died in their defence." He is a great role model because he is very inspirational with his words and because he used his power and influence to work towards the safety and wellbeing of his people. He would also stop racism between different people and would always start up campaigns to stop racism. He challenges masculine stereotypes such as homophobia and acting tough in his speeches and his quotes and uses his platform to teach a different message to people. He used his own experiences of racism to try and help others overcome their own struggles.

My other favourite male role model is Will Smith. He is my other favourite role model because he started as a rapper, earning some money from his songs, and then becoming one of the world's best actors EVER. He would be a good role model towards other males (especially teenagers) because at the age of 13, his parents actually separated, but he carried on his school career, completing his high school tests and then going on to becoming one of the best artists and actors in the world. He challenges masculine stereotypes such as homophobia and in 2012, he stated that he would support and hopefully legalize same-sex marriage. This is a challenge to masculine stereotypes because lots of men think that 'being gay' or 'supporting gay people' is weird because heterosexual relationships is what it's 'supposed to be', but Will doesn't think so and he's not scared to say that to other men.



LETTER TO MY FUTURE SELF

After the boys had finished their presentations on their chosen male role models, we wrapped the project up by asking the boys to write letters to their future selves. These letters were to specifically address the subject of the kind of men they hoped they would turn into when they were older; one they could be proud of and one who had stayed true to the values, beliefs and behaviours that they felt made a good man. To conclude this book, we leave you with a selection of the boys letters written in their final session.

DEAR PEDRO,

I hope you have become a reasonable man. I hope you don't forget to follow your dreams and I hope you have money to look after and help your family members. Pedro, I really want you to be that man that respects women and not go for them because of their looks but because of their personality because personality is what really matters. I want you to be a successful man with a good job and someone who has constructed a family. I hope you have lots of friends, and not fake friends that just want your money or clout. Pedro, I want you to be a wise man that has rules and can control your emotions and not react to people with negative comments. Pedro, I hope you won't be someone who forgets their family and just think about themselves. I want you to be a happy man that loves their mum.

Pedro, never lose your kindness and love for people and the world. Many men forget how to smile and to laugh and to be open and free – don't be one of those men. Be you.

Love from,

PEDRO FLO-SIMBA

DEAR FERNANDO,

Yo Bro, how life? How's football? Good I hope? Keep it up. I don't want you to fall into the wrong crowd. Do you want to end up six feet under with roses or six feet high with medals? Just think about it. Make sure you're respecting mumzi yeah! She's the only one you've got, the one that's been there when you've needed her the most. Make sure that you're still playing and praying like mumzi asked. Make sure you remember what you're playing for, Sheila and Sato.

Mentally you should be succeeding. Make sure you're like your role model, Danny Rose. Do you remember? He spoke out about his anxiety and his fight with depression and overcame his struggles, make sure you are doing that too. Its ok to have money and be successful like AJ but remain modest like mum. Flaunting money will bring in the wrong crowd of friends. Don't be like dad, respect women. They are the reason why we are alive.

Watch that temper, remember to not let your excitement get the better of you. The best players, and the best men, support their team mates and their friends. When all is said and done, these are the things that make the real difference. You have a good heart and are kind and caring – don't lose that as you get older and the pressures to be a certain 'type' of man get greater. Be true to yourself.

Love from,

FERNANDO SONCO



DEAR HASSAN,

I hope you are the man I predicted that you would be - 6ft, good beard and in good shape and successful. Try your hardest to be fit and healthy and respect yourself. Look after your siblings like they looked after you when you were young. Some parts of masculinity are correct but some are false; you can be a real man but not follow the stereotypes of fighting, violence and sexism. Help your mum out like she helped you. Smile, be ok to show your emotions and how you are feeling. Don't be sexist, it's wrong, and always behave in a respectful manner towards women and all humans. See the world as our joint home, not as a place where humans oppress one another.

Remember that as you get older there will be pressures to be a man that will mean doing things you don't want to do and acting in ways that aren't true to who you really are. Remember your heart as a young man and that place inside you that knows right from wrong... and follow it!

Love from,

HASSAN SHEIK



DEAR ISMAEEL,

I want you to be a good man and try not to be a show off. I want you to have a good job and be clever and well educated. I also hope you have a nice place to live and you keep fit and sporty. Do not be scared to show your emotions, do not be scared to be yourself and don't feel like you have to be the same as everyone else. You don't have to act tough or be someone you are not, be true to yourself.

Its ok to be shy sometimes but also make sure you take the opportunities that life gives you. There are many ways of being brave and real men know how to pick their battles and fight for what is right for themselves, their friends and their families.

Love from,

ISMAEEL ASSOUL





DEAR JAIDEN,

Try not to get into many fights and treat everyone with respect, especially your family members. I want to make sure that any children I have don't fall into the pressures and just be themselves. You don't have to act tough and pretend and its ok to have feelings and emotions. Make sure to always be yourself and don't change your personality for anyone else. Respect everyone equally and don't see girls as objects because they are humans just like men and should be treated like equally. Listen to the opinions of women like you would hope they listen to your opinions.

Stay cheeky, and keep seeing life as funny but also know when to be serious. Be a man that stands up for what is right and follows your heart and not just the things that other people around you want to do.

Love from,

JAIDEN HOWES



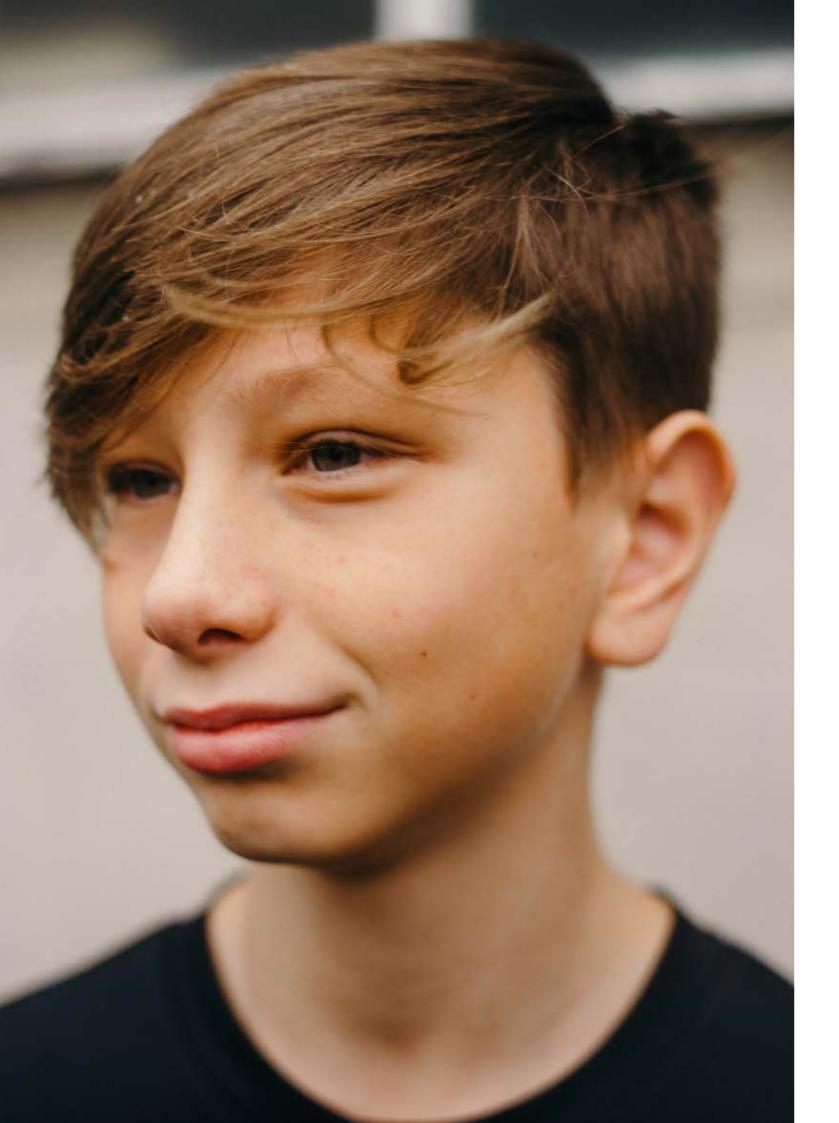
DEAR GUI,

I hope you are the man you wanted to be when you were younger, I hope you are smart, reasonable and kind. I want you to be successful, but to reach there you will have to work hard and use your time wisely. I know sometimes you have trouble listening and concentrating but I believe that you can do it. You can be whatever you want to be; a policeman, a doctor, a lawyer or a footballer. I hope you are the kind of man who is always positive and looks after his family. I hope you are polite and respectful and lead by example, showing others how to be a god man. I hope you respect women and protect people who cannot protect themselves – do what is right and not what is easy. Don't be afraid to cry and show your true feelings – that is what makes a real man.

Gui, stay smiling and stay laughing, you are funny and make people laugh but you are also way more than that. I hope you are a man that can be serious when you need to be and still light and open and funny. Stay looking after your friends and your family and stay true to your heart.

Love from,

GUI FERNANDES



DEAR LOUIS,

You don't have to be big, but try because I want to have some muscles. Respect all women, always. Raise your children properly and set them the example of not being shy or scared to show your emotions. Don't mess up too bad. Teach your children to respect everyone and always have good manners. When people wind you up or get on your nerves, trying to get a reaction, don't get angry, be the bigger man and walk away. It's good to be brave and strong but there are different ways of showing it. Don't be a stereotype.

Love from,

LOUIS LAVIN



DEAR MCKENZIE,

I hope you become the man that you wanted to be. The kind of man that wants to listen and that wants to be respected by the younger and older generations. I hope you have children that know how to respect their world and also how to protect themselves. Dear older self, I hope you treat women as people and not as objects or a prize to be won. See women not as things to be won but as people whose companionship you have to earn through good respect and by treating them well and equally. Teach your children to respect women in this way too. Dear older self, I hope you have become this man that I aspire to be.

McKenzie, I hope you never lose your kindness and your gentle way of being. I hope you are still sensitive to the world around you and don't feel the pressure to cover up that love and intelligence. These are the qualities that will help you to be a happy and complete man.

Love from,

MCKENZIE REID





DEAR ZAM,

At the time when you are reading this, in your 30's, I want you to have a good job. I want you to be mature and respectful to everyone – men and women. Don't see women as objects or treat them like they are there for your amusement. When you have a wife and children make sure you are kind to them. Show them that it is ok to be yourself and not try and impress anyone else. Show them that there are many ways to be a man. Be strong be healthy and good to others.

Zam, stay humble, it is a good trait. Keep smiling and being positive. You have a gentle nature which sometimes people might mistake for weakness but which is actually a sign of strength and courage. Don't lose sight of this now you are older. When you get frustrated, learn to stay calm and practice your breathing – a man knows how to handle difficulties with calm and focus.

Love from,

ZAM SANGAR



DEAR TOMMY,

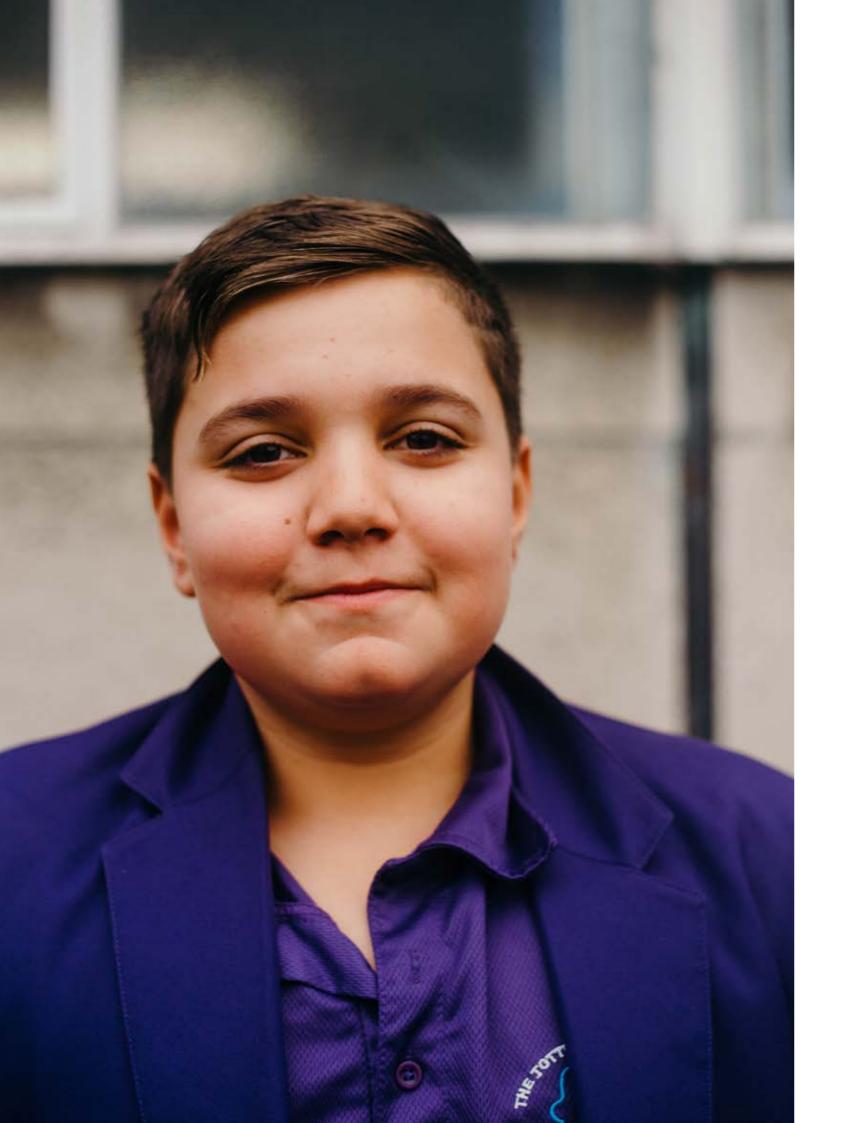
At the time I am reading this, I am probably 30 years old. I hope that I am a mature and respectable man who shows respect to girls and to my family and friends. I hope you treat women as equals and don't treat them as objects. I hope you have raised a family and that you have taught you children to be respectful to women and men too. I hope you can show your emotions and not bottle it up thinking that men have to be silent and tough all the time. I hope to have an Arsenal season ticket and go to every home game with my friends.

Tommy, I hope you are still playing football and are confident about your ability. You are a good player but sometimes you can struggle to realise this on the pitch. It is ok to know you are good and not the same as being cocky or arrogant. Stay smiling and keep being kind to those around you, setting the example that real men look after their friends and are there for them when needed.

Love from,

TOMMY ROBERTS





DEAR LEWIS,

I hope you have turned into a respectful man who takes care of others. Whatever age you are, don't be afraid to show your emotions and remember that's it unhealthy to keep it all hidden. Don't forget to show love and kindness to your family always. I hope you have been successful in school and at work. Never feel the pressure that society places on you to be a certain kind of man and be ok with being you just as you are. Its ok to be anyone you want to be and not to always conform to the stereotypes of the man box.

Don't be afraid to be who you really are, you have a big heart and a kind soul and don't let anyone else make you feel like you have to change. I hope when you are older you are a man who accepts yourself and doesn't fear being yourself – this is the kind of bravery that makes a real man.

Love from,

LEWIS DITCHMAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BARBARA PREMO

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