

Just the Facts

Full Name: Victor La Cerva

Date of birth: July 8, 1949

Place of birth: Brooklyn, New York

Your job profession then and now: MD (Public Health Physician, originally trained in Pediatrics)

Year you came to NM: 1979

Year(s) you led the conference:

First one with Jeff Pine and Art Hoffman; 2nd 3rd and 4th on my own

Number of attendees (your best recollection):

We had about 25 for the first one, then up to 40, then 60 then 80 or 100 for the last one I led.

T-shirt designer:

When I passed over the conference to David B and David K, I was gifted a single tee shirt which said NM men's Wellness. "If you can't flee or fight, FLOW"

Themes of your conferences:

The first conference was heavily influenced by public health concepts. We did dietary recalls, and exercise testing, focusing a lot on physical health. I also initiated a "pick a topic from a hat" which we did a video of, with topics including high heels and black stockings, divorce, friendship, my dad. I learned a number of things that were really important for the future.

The real juice was when we got into emotional issues and men's pain of isolation. We also learned that it was really essential to have everyone there for the whole thing. We brought in a man for the last morning to discuss spirituality and he was totally out of the loop, not having been there, which created all sorts of miscommunications. I knew then if we did this again, we would have everyone be part of the process, and no "outside experts". One of the evenings during some deep share and bonding, we had a very loud Baptist group singing to Jesus in the room right next to us. I realized at that moment that we needed to find a different venue if we were to do the conference again.

After that first one, my vision was always that we would eventually have a conference for each season. After the second one, I even started a Xeroxed newsletter to try and keep us connected in between events (this is pre-Email and easy mailing lists). Then Chuck started Man Alive which was a great gift.

Why this theme? The three of us were coming from a public health prevention of disease perspective.

How and when did you learn of / conceive of men's wellness?

The women had done a thing called women's wellness, and that sparked an idea. They are no longer doing theirs.

What was your greatest challenge in taking on a leadership role with the conference?

Setting a positive tone and direction, trying to bring in enough ritual but not too much, spirituality but not religion, getting men to open up emotionally. I remember saying at a planning meeting that if we can get men to cry and laugh a lot, talk about their fears, and really examine their anger, then we would have succeeded.

What was your greatest satisfaction, insight gained, in leading?

The organic nature of how things evolved. We were talking about war during a session, and a Black man, Ralph Steele, stood up and said he had served in Viet Nam, and never been welcomed home. We all spontaneously got up and formed a line and welcomed him back, expressing our joy that he was alive. That was the seed for me that we needed a Vets ceremony. I asked John Lissoway to help create one the following year. I bought a bowl and pitcher and we had the vets in the center and the rest of us (all of us affected by war in some way) in a circle. They shared their stories and then came around and washed all our hands, one by one. Very powerful and the beginning of what has evolved further into our grief ceremony. I love the whole creative process of coming up with a crazy idea, then making it happen at the conference in a way that is of benefit and service to men.

What, if any, were your disappointments?

Our consistent lack of ability to attract more than 10% minorities, gays and young men. Some of the spin off activities were very satisfying, if not completely enduring. The multicultural men's group (held together for 6 months) and the Santa Fe men's center (about 18 months duration) come to mind.

How has your own life, or path, been different since leading the conference?

I was interested in developing the conference because a lot of men I called my friends were out of state. I was raising young children and knew I needed to recreate some of the extended family network I had grown up with. So it was for both professional and selfish reasons. I wanted more good male friends in my life....who actually lived in New Mexico! My core men's group 18 years old, formed out of the first few conferences. The whole network has been an ongoing source of wonder and joy in my life, and helped to make me a better man. It has been one of three core elements in my healing service work around peacemaking, along with Aikido practice and a variety of public health violence prevention initiatives.

What do you see as the future of NM Men's Wellness? What should change, stay the same?

More regular events. More opportunities for gays, minorities, and young men.

What message would you like to share in particular with the younger men 16-35)?

We need to make this real for you. Help us. The conference process has always included mentoring and helping others to come forth with their gifts.

Any other personal reflections, acknowledgments, peeves, etc., responses to a question not asked?

The essence of men's wellness is to share the pain and celebrate the joys of being a man in this time and place in the world. Redefining a healthy masculinity and creating peace within ourselves is the first step to world peace. I am honored to have been a part of that process.