

Black Men Quietly Combating Stereotypes

By ERIN TEXEIRA

NEW YORK (AP) - Keith Borders tries hard not to scare people.

He's 6-foot-7, a garrulous lawyer who talks with his hands.

And he's black.

Many people find him threatening. He works hard to prove otherwise.

"I have a very keen sense of my size and how I communicate," says Borders of Mason, Ohio. "I end up putting my hands in my pockets or behind me. I stand with my feet closer together. With my feet spread out, it looks like I'm taking a stance. And I use a softer voice."

Every day, African-American men consciously work to offset stereotypes about them - that they are dangerous, aggressive, angry. Some smile a lot, dress conservatively and speak with deference: "Yes, sir," or "No, ma'am." They are mindful of their bodies, careful not to dart into closing elevators or stand too close in grocery stores.

It's all about surviving, and trying to thrive, in a nation where biased views of black men stubbornly hang on decades after segregation and where statistics show a yawning gap between the lives of white men and black men. Black men's median wages are barely three-fourths those of whites; nearly 1 in 3 black men will spend time behind bars during his life; and, on average, black men die six years earlier than whites.

Sure, everyone has ways of coping with other people's perceptions: Who acts the same at work as they do with their kids, or their high school friends?

But for black men, there's more at stake. If they don't carefully calculate how to handle everyday situations - in ways that usually go unnoticed - they can end up out of a job, in jail or dead.

"It's a stressful process," Borders says.

Melissa Harris Lacewell, a political scientist at the University of Chicago, says learning to adapt is at the heart of being an American black male.

"Black mothers and fathers socialize their sons to not make waves, to not come up against the authorities, to speak even more politely not only when there are whites present but particularly if there are whites who have power," she said.

"Most black men are able to shift from a sort of relaxed, authentically black pose into a respectable black man pose. Either they develop the dexterity to move back and forth or ultimately they flounder."

It's a lot like a game of chess, says 43-year-old Chester Williams, who owns Chester Electric in New Orleans. He has taught his three sons, ages 16, 14 and 11, to play.

"The rules of the game are universal: White moves first, then black moves," he said. "Black has to respond to the moves that the whites make. You take the advantage when it's available."

Twenty-year-old Chauncy Medder of Brooklyn says his baggy jeans and oversized T-shirts make him seem like "another one of those thuggish black kids." He offsets that with "Southern charm" he learned attending high school in Virginia - "a lot of 'Yes, ma'ams,' and as little slang as possible. When I speak to them (whites), they're like, 'Hey, you're different.'"

Such skillful little changes in style aren't talked about much, especially not outside of black households - there's no reason to tip your hand. As Walter White, a black sales executive from Cincinnati, puts it: "Not talking is a way to get what you want."

He recalled that, "as a child, we all sat down with my mother and father and watched the movie 'Roots,'" the groundbreaking 1970s television miniseries tracing a black family from Africa through slavery and into modern times.

The slaves were quietly obedient around whites. "But as soon as the master was gone," he said, "they did what they really wanted to do. That's what we were taught."

Historians agree that black stereotypes and coping strategies are rooted in America's history of slavery and segregation.

Jay Carrington Chunn's mother taught him "how to read 'Whites Only' and 'Negro Only' before she taught me anything else," said the 63-year-old, who grew up in Atlanta. "Black parents taught you how to react when police stopped you, how to respond to certain problems, how to act in school to get the best grade."

School is still a challenge, even from an early age.

Last year, Yale University research on public school pre-kindergarten programs in 40 states found that blacks were expelled twice as often as whites - and nine out of 10 blacks expelled were boys. The report did not analyze the patterns, but some trace it to negative views about black boys.

Black male children are often "labeled in public schools as being out of control," said Lacewell, who studies black political culture and wrote "Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought."

"If you're a black boy who is smart and energetic and always has the answer and throws his hand up in the air," she said, "you might as a parent say, 'Even if you know the answer you might not want to make a spectacle of yourself. You don't want to call attention to yourself.'"

Bill Fletcher still has nightmares about his third-grade teacher, a white woman who "treated me and other black students as if we were idiots," he said. "She destroyed my confidence."

But his parents were strong advocates, and taught him to cope by having little contact with teachers who didn't take an interest in him, said Fletcher, former president of TransAfrica Forum, a group that builds ties between African-Americans and Africa.

As black boys become adolescents, the dangers escalate. Like most teenagers, they battle raging hormones and identity crises. Many rebel, trying to fit in by mimicking - and sometimes becoming - criminals.

"They are basically seen as public menaces," Lacewell said.

Rasheed Smith, 22, a soft-spoken, aspiring hip-hop lyricist from the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, recently tapped his long fingers, morosely counting his friends killed in neighborhood violence in the last five years - 11 in all. Few spent much time beyond their blocks, let alone their neighborhood. Some sold drugs or got in other trouble and had near-constant contact with police.

Smith has survived by staying close to his family. He advised: "With police, you talk to them the way they talk to you. You get treated how you act."

Twenty years ago, Carol Taylor's teenage son - now a lawyer - was mugged twice near their Brooklyn home, but police officers "treated him like he had done the mugging," she said. She wrote and self-published "The Little Black Book: Survival Commandments for Black Men" filled with tips on how to deal with police: keep your hands visible, carry a camera, don't say much but be polite.

"Don't take this as a time to prove your manhood," wrote Taylor, a retired nurse and community activist who said she's sold thousands of the pocket-sized, \$2 books.

And more general advice: "Learn to read, write and type, and to speak English correctly. This is survival, not wishful thinking. If you are going to survive in America, go to college!"

One selective business program at historically black Hampton University in Virginia directs black men to wear dark, conservative suits to class. Earrings and dreadlocked hairstyles are forbidden. Their appearance is "communicating a signal that says you can go into more places," said business school dean Sid Credle. "There's more universal acceptance if you're conservative in your image and dress style."

One graphic artist says he wears a suit when traveling, "even if it's on a weekend. I think it helps. It requests respect."

But in the corporate world, clothing can only help so much, said Janet B. Reid of Global Lead Management Consulting, who advises companies on managing ethnic diversity.

Black men, especially those who look physically imposing, often have a tough time.

"Someone who is tall and muscular will learn to come into a meeting and sit down quickly," she said. "They're trying to lower the big barrier of resistance, one that's fear-based and born of stereotypes."

Having darker brown skin can erect another barrier. Mark Ferguson has worked on Wall Street for 20 years. He has an easy smile and firm, confident handshake.

"I think I clean up pretty well - I dress well, I speak well - but all that goes out the window when I show up at a meeting full of white men," says Ferguson of New Jersey, who is 6-foot-4 and dark-skinned. "It's because they're afraid of me."

"Race always matters," said Ferguson, whose Day in the Life Foundation connects minority teenagers with professionals. "It's always in play."

Fletcher knows his light brown skin gives him an advantage - except that he's "unsmiling."

"If you're a black man who doesn't smile a lot, they (whites) get really nervous," he said. "There are black people I run across all the time and they're always smiling particularly when they're around white people. A lot of white people find that very comforting."

All this takes a toll.

Many black men say the daily maneuvering leaves them enraged and exhausted. For decades, they continuously self-analyze and shift, subtly dampening their personalities. In the end, even the best strategies don't always work.

"I've seen it play out many times" in corporations, said Reid of Global Lead. "They go from depression to corporate suicide. Marital problems can come up. He loses all self confidence and the ability to feel manly and in control of his own fate."

Sherman James, a social psychologist at Duke University, studies how the stress of coping for black men can damage the circulatory system and lead to chronic poor health. Black men are 20 percent more likely to die of heart disease than whites, and they have the highest rates of hypertension in the world, according to the National Medical Association.

The flip side, black men say, is that many learn to be resilient.

Ferguson recalls when a new Wall Street colleague, minutes after meeting him and hearing he grew up in a housing project in Newark, N.J., asked if he had been involved in "any illicit activities" there. He shrugged it off.

Over the years, as he has earned promotions and built client relationships over the phone, he has learned to steel himself for face-to-face meetings - for clients' raised eyebrows and stuttered greetings when they see he is black.

"It just rolls off our backs - we grin and bear it. You can't quit," he said, sighing heavily. He vents his frustrations to mentors and relaxes with his wife and young children.

"Then you go back," he said, "and fight the good fight."