I was just three years old when my family and I first moved to Markham in 2001. While I was too young to remember much, I do remember the city looking completely different from what it looks like today. There wasn't much going on back then; there was no 3D printers, STEAM camps, or Pokemon Go to keep us entertained. If you were bored, the universal response was "go outside and play".

One summer when my mom revoked my TV privileges after watching too many cartoons, the only thing I had was the outdoors. But when I say the outdoors, I don't mean camping, hiking, fishing, or anything like that. We had an apple tree in our backyard and some plants on our front lawn - that was the extent of my experience "outdoors", but I made the most of it. Right around that same time, I had just watched the first Spiderman movie with my big brother, so naturally when I was spending time "outdoors" I was really just hoping to find a radioactive spider for my big brother.

After realizing I wasn't going to find any radioactive spiders at McCowan and 14th, I decided to see what other insects I could find. I didn't even like bugs that much, that's just how bored I was. I asked my mom to take me to the dollar store and we picked up this bug-catching kit that came with a jar, a magnifying glass, and a tweezer-like tool. From there I spent my days walking around my house trying to find whatever interesting bugs I could; it was Pokemon Go in real life. I would pick up worms, spiders, beetles, ants, moths, the occasional butterfly, and sometimes I would even try my luck at toads and frogs.

The phase didn't last longer than a few months, but that was my first real experience connecting with nature and the outdoors. Fast forward to my last year of high school - I was at the pinnacle of my teenage years; good grades, student council president, valedictorian. The world was my oyster. But instead of taking the traditional alpha-male route to become a doctor, lawyer, or engineer, I decided to study environmental science. It took a lot of people by surprise, because like I mentioned I wasn't the traditional "environmental or outdoorsy" type. I didn't really tell anyone this, but my rationale for choosing environmental studies wasn't because I wanted to save the turtles or anything like that, it's because I wanted to learn how I could help climate refugees. My parents were refugees of the Sri Lankan civil war and Sri Lanka is one of the most vulnerable nations to the impacts of climate change, so I wanted to find a way to learn more about my roots and how I could protect and preserve the heritage of my parents. While at the time I thought it was a noble cause to pursue, in actuality I just got labeled as a tree-hugging hippie.

But that's not what bothered me most. What bothered me most was the sheer lack of respect that people had for environmentalism; specifically males. I went to a predominately engineering-centric university and anytime I mentioned I was an environmental studies student I was met with shock, confusion, or belittlement by my male counterparts. They would look at me as if I had just said the earth was flat; as if somehow my degree made me a lesser man. I don't think it was intentional, I just think there was this preconception that tough, strong, alpha men don't spend their time IDing birds and butterflies, even though that's not remotely close to what I did.

At first, I thought it was all in my head, but then I started to come across research that supported what I was seeing. There were all kinds of studies that supported the fact that men resist "green" behavior because it's unmanly or because there's an eco-gender gap that exists. There's one headline that I'll never forget, "Men avoid reusable shopping bags so they won't be perceived as feminine". That was the tipping point for me that led me to my journey to bridge the gap between masculinity and environmentalism. The fact that men would rather contribute to the degradation of our planet than risk being seen as feminine was absolutely insane to me. But if we're being honest, as a man, I could see where they were coming from. Environmentalists are predominately females and while there is absolutely nothing wrong with that, I can see why a man may be reluctant to embrace environmentalism as part of his identity. But the solution isn't to remove feminism from the equation, it's to add healthy masculinity to the point where males actually want to embrace environmentalism. Or as I like to put it how do we show men that "caring is cool"?

It turns out that's a lot easier said than done. How was I going to make reusable water bottles and tote bags cool? After years of attempts, I realized the importance of showing, not telling. I could talk endlessly about why being compassionate is cool, but people needed to see that for themselves. Sure, I could influence a few people here and there, but if I wanted systemic change I knew I needed to create something bigger than myself. So I thought to myself, who has authority? Who do people listen to? Who does everyone want to be? Your friendly neighborhood Spiderman of course. I thought back to the days when I would search for spiders and bugs in my backyard because my brother and I wanted to be spiderman. That's when it hit me. What's cooler than a superhero? Everyone loves a superhero and everyone wants to be a superhero, so what if I created a superhero who symbolized both masculinity and environmentalism? Ergo, Pollinator Man was born.

In June 2022, I published the story of Pollinator Man. Pollinator Man is a story about a superhero who is overwhelmed by the forces of evil and must recruit a team of young nature enthusiasts who must complete a series of side missions to become official pollinator protectors. Only then can Pollinator Man take down his new enemies like Pesticide Boy, Dr. Disease, and Climate Crusher! While on the surface the story is about pollinators and pollinator conservation, Pollinator Man represents so much more than that. He's a symbol to young boys that environmentalists are indeed cool, but even more importantly environmentalists are desperately needed. If you ask a young boy what he wants to be when he grows up the most common responses you'll get are astronaut, doctor, lawyer, racecar driver, etc. My goal is to inspire the next generation of young boys to say environmentalists. I mean what's cooler than saving the planet?

While representation isn't everything, I do believe it matters. If young boys can see Pollinator Man as a role model and "say I want to be like him when I grow up", then I've done my job. I don't believe there is anything wrong with the traditional idea of masculinity. Being stoic, courageous, and fearless isn't the problem. The problem is when we limit and refuse to expand the social construct of masculinity. Why can't we be courageous and compassionate? Why can't

we be strong and gentle? Why can't we be composed and emotional? These attributes don't have to be mutually exclusive. Incorporating these elements into our lives not only makes us better men… it makes us better humans. I don't want to take away anything from masculinity, I only want to add to it.

As a man myself, I don't like the term toxic masculinity. But at some point, we have to admit that hypermasculinity is part of the problem. Hypermasculinity tends to present itself to either overcompensate or protect against threats to our masculinity. For example, being told that eating steaks and driving fast cars feels like an attack on masculinity and as an instinctive male response, we double down on those very things to preserve and protect our masculinity. Steaks and fast cars aren't the problems though, it's meat consumption and fossil fuel emissions. Yes, steaks and fast cars contribute to those issues, but because those things are inherently part of the traditional male identity, it comes off as an attack on masculinity. So the challenge becomes how do we avoid feeling like masculinity is being infringed on…? We expand what it means to be a man. This doesn't mean that tofu and electric scooters are suddenly going to be symbols of masculinity. It means we need to find new ways for men to feel and express their masculinity and that is a lot easier said than done. For me, that starts with showing men that caring is cool.

The climate crisis is the greatest existential challenge humanity has ever faced, and if we are going to solve it we need to find a way to bring everyone to the table. With all of its complexities and nuances, we are going to need creative solutions which require a mosaic of perspectives and experiences. If men don't come to the table we are missing out on valuable insights and experiences that we need. So if you're a young man listening to this, please know that the world needs you. The world needs more positive male role models who are both charismatic and compassionate. We need more men whose masculinity isn't threatened by the idea of carrying a reusable grocery bag. We need men not to part ways with traditional ideas of masculinity, but rather add to what it means to be masculine. We need men like you to answer the call.

The world is not static, it evolves, and so do we. So why can't our definition of masculinity follow suit? Toby Maguire as Spiderman and Tom Holland as Spiderman are two completely different characters, yet they're both Spiderman. Both are just as heroic, witty, and capable. As such, you may be very different from the traditional man, but that doesn't need to make you any less masculine. Masculinity is not a fixed or absolute definition, it is a social construct that exists as a collection of patterns and experiences. It's not something we can just rewrite, it is something that we have to re-establish through our actions. As we continue to evolve and grow, my hope is that we choose to re-establish what it means to be masculine by demonstrating that attributes like strength and sympathy can not only exist in harmony but can actually complement each other. This is how we build better men, and this is how we build a better planet.