

Brainwashed no more

The firestorm over Zach, an out teen trapped in an "ex-gay" program in Tennessee, has uncovered the far right's aggressive efforts to force gay youths to act straight. Some have escaped and share their harrowing tales By Kelly Griffith

The low point for Katie Frick was when a traveling evangelist had her stand up at the front of a church and had the faithful lay their hands on her, praying for the change. Jesus could do it, they assured her, if only she followed closely enough.

Frick, 18 at the time, was still fresh from a three-day Exodus International rally where emotions ran high and nightly altar calls forced gay teens on their knees. Maybe they could be shamed into repenting their sexuality.

Frick tried. She had been sent to the program by her parents after she came out at 17, a move that led to her two-year journey with guilt and God. "They are destroying people," she says.

Yet Frick survived. She is now 21, completely out, and an active member at the Metropolitan Community Church in Sarasota, Fla. She hopes to become a minister in the gay-affirming denomination. "My current pastor has been with her partner for 26 years, and they are very happy," Frick says. "[Ex-gay] programs] don't show you that. I wouldn't take all the money in the world to go back."

That world is only getting more chilling: While programs that promise to turn gay men and lesbians straight have existed for more than two decades, experts say that during the past few years the religious right has banded together like never before to spend millions on such programs. An article in the September/October 2004 issue of *YouthWorker Journal*, a magazine aimed at those who minister to young people, says sexuality will be a top issue to be addressed by ministries in the next 20 years.

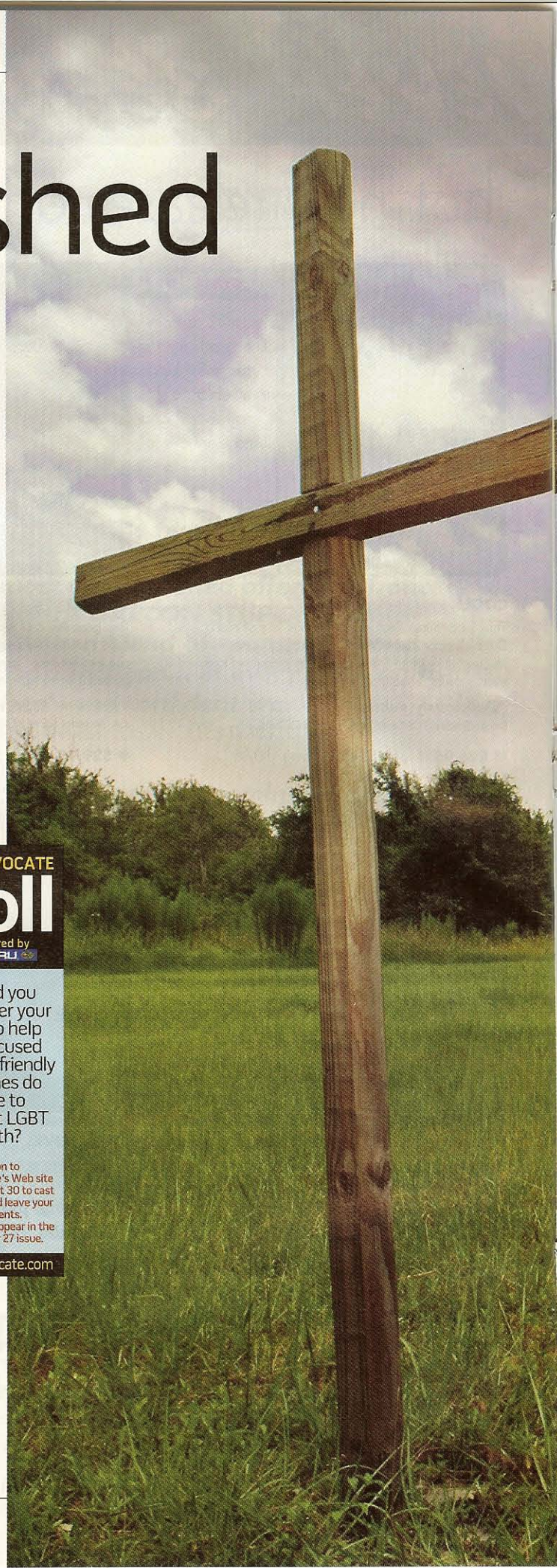
"What makes these programs so effective is the large infrastructure that supports them, both directly and through their constant influence," says Peterson Toscano, who unsuccessfully tried to "turn himself straight" in the Love in Action ex-gay ministry almost a decade ago. Today, he satirizes the experience in his one-man come-

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COLBY KATZ/WORLD PICTURE NEWS FOR THE ADVOCATE

dy routine *Doin' Time in the Homo No Mo Halfway House*.

The issue reached a crescendo in June when 16-year-old Zach described on his blog at www.myspace.com/specialkid his unwilling enrollment—by his parents—in a restrictive program called Refuge, a youth organization near Memphis affiliated with Love in Action International. A firestorm of controversy, government inquiries, and protests by gay rights groups resulted. The Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities began looking into the program in July, wanting to know if it conducted improper counseling with unlicensed employees, and the state's Department of Children's Services investigated the group on a child abuse complaint, finding the claim unsubstantiated.

The effort to get teens to turn straight is being led by Focus on the Family and Exodus, an umbrella organization for more than 120 programs. Focus, with \$136 million in annual revenue, in 2003 spent \$10.2 million on antigay efforts including its ex-gay program, Love Won Out, and fighting marriage equality. The year before it reported only \$4.9 million for "public policy awareness."

Exodus officials say launching Exodus Youth, aimed at teens, was one of their major accomplishments of 2002, and the marketing is intensifying. The Exodus annual conference in Asheville, N.C., in July, specifically targeted both teens and parents who would do practically anything to make their kids straight.

Child welfare advocates are deeply concerned about programs that take in children on a residential basis and even on some overseas "boot camps" or "ranches." Such camps exist in the United States and in places like Jamaica and Mexico, where there is little or no government oversight. Many programs aren't required to file even the most basic public record information since they fall under

"My pastor has been with her [same-sex] partner for 26 years. Ex-gay programs don't show you that reality."

—Ex-gay ministry survivor Katie Frick (pictured)

the umbrella of churches and have a religious exemption from state licensing and taxes. They may not tout themselves as ex-gay in advertising, yet they harbor the same disdain for gayness—far from the watchful eyes of federal authorities.

Federal representative George Miller, a California Democrat, filed a bill in the House in April that would require more federal oversight of any programs that attempt to treat children outside the country, citing specifically the World Wide Association of Specialty Programs, a secular group of teen-aimed facilities that have been investigated for abusive and neglectful conditions. The watchdog group International Survivors Action Committee declares not only WWASP as dangerous but also warns parents against Refuge, a program touted by leaders of the ex-gay movement.

"There's no doubt in my mind that there is a concerted, organized, and coordinated effort to target kids," says Wayne Besen, author of *Anything But Straight*, a 2003 book on the ex-gay ►

movement. He's fearful of get-tough conservative religious programs like Refuge, which offers two- and six-week residential programs for teens. And outside the United States, Besen says, such camps "are harder to monitor. It's like tracking nursing homes that abuse the elderly. They don't exactly advertise [the abuse]."

Gays and lesbians may not realize the lengths to which the groups go to get youths' attention. In some cases they've resorted to one of the oldest tricks in the Internet porn industry: using benign keywords to lure Web surfers. One ex-gay Web site for youths, for instance, uses "Yugioh!," the name of a card game popular with young children, as a keyword that will be picked up by search engines. Another uses "Walt Disney World."

Evergreen International, a Utah-based Mormon group that targets youths, has opted to use a scientific-sounding name—the Center for the Study of Gender-Affirmative Therapy—to lend credibility to its teachings. Expanding the program was one of their major goals for 2003.

Such programs are often denounced by former members—most notoriously Exodus itself, as two of its founders, Gary Cooper and Michael Bussee, in 1979 fell in love, rejected the organization, left their wives, and remained committed to one another until Cooper's death in the 1990s. (They are pictured on page 45, in the blue tuxedos.) John Evans, a cofounder of Love in Action, renounced the program 30 years ago, and a recent statement details his objections. "Since leaving the 'ex-gay' ministry I have seen nothing but shattered lives, depression and even suicide among those connected with the 'ex-gay' movement," he wrote in a statement released by Besen July 30. "I challenge Christians to investigate all sides of the issue of being gay and Christian."

The ministries' long-term effect on impressionable young gay people continues to worry advocates such as E.J. Friedman, 35, one of about 10 activists and media representatives who attended a Refuge meeting in July to hear the "ex-gay" pitch firsthand. "These are children," Friedman says. "I'm so afraid this is going to be the kind of thing that they don't even realize the full effects of until months or even years later. That as their natural sexual feelings come out, they won't be able to enjoy anything. They won't be able to enjoy life. They won't be able to be whole."

For Zach, the Tennessee blogger, being forced into Refuge was a direct result of being honest with his parents. Unmindful of his son's privacy, Zach's father talked to Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network, saying he would never regret placing his son there. (His parents did not return repeated phone calls, and *The Advocate* is not printing Zach's last name because he is under 18.)

Allies in escaping the "ex-gay" trap

It took only two days for Kevin to figure out that the Dream Center, a large Los Angeles ministry, wasn't for him. The gay teenager, who grew up in California's foster care system, was tired of hearing from his foster mother, a religious social worker, and ministers from the conservative Christian program that he needed to be straight. When he turned 19 earlier this year he sought help at a transitional hous-

ing program for GLBT youth. Officials at Kevin's housing center (which *The Advocate* agreed not to identify, to protect his privacy) say the number of kids from religious homes who have wound up there during the past year has increased by about 10% and that their median age is getting lower.

GLBT youths kicked out by their families after coming out may find referrals to such queer-friendly shelter

programs from sympathetic social workers or at local GLBT community centers such as those in Los Angeles (www.laglc.org), New York, (www.gaycenter.org), or San Francisco (www.sfgaycenter.org). Some cities have well-established temporary or transitional housing programs such as Gay and Lesbian Adolescent Social Services (www.glassla.org) in Los Angeles, the Lambert House in Seattle (www.lamberthouse.org), or the Ali Forney Center in New York City (www.ali-forneycenter.org).—K.G.

Supportive resources for Christian youth

- **Gay Christian Outreach**, online resources, message boards, chat; send e-mail to gaychristianoutreach@groups.msn.com
- **Gay-Straight Alliance Network**, aimed at teens in schools, at www.gsanetwork.org
- **Metropolitan Community Churches**, a GLBT-focused Christian denomination, at www.mccchurch.org
- **OutProud**, a group for teens, www.outproud.org
- **PFLAG** [see page 46], at www.pflag.org
- **Soulforce**, a gay-affirming spiritual organization, at www.soulforce.org
- **Unitarian Universalist Church**, a gay-inclusive denomination with roots in Christian and Jewish traditions, at www.uua.org
- **United Church of Christ**, a gay-inclusive Christian denomination, at www.ucc.org
- **Whosoever**, an online magazine and resource center for gay Christians, including a mailing list, at www.whosoever.org

Zach's perspective is related on his blog: "May 29—Well, today my mother, father, and I had a very long 'talk' in my room, where they let me know I am to apply for a fundamentalist Christian program for gays. They tell me that there is something psychologically wrong with me, and they 'raised me wrong'... I wish I had never told them. I wish I had just fought the urge for two more years.... I had done it for three before then, right?"

After receiving the rules for the program—including bans on "campy" behavior and private journaling—Zach reported, "All new Refuge clients will be placed into Safekeeping for the initial two to three days of their program," a period during which the youths are forbidden any communication "or eye contact" with anyone.

Zach was livid. Even prisons let people talk. "May 30—What ►

is with these people? Honestly, how could you support a program like this? If I do come out straight, I'll be so mentally unstable and depressed that it won't matter. I'll be back in therapy again. This is not good."

Many deeply religious parents are more supportive of their children than Zach's dad. Longtime Southern Baptist Kay Holladay, 60, says her 41-year-old son came out to her and her husband when he was just an Oklahoma teenager, and they had no problems accepting him. They only recently left their Baptist church to help start their own group for "thinking Christians." A cofounder of the PFLAG chapter in Norman, Okla., Holladay also helps staff the group's hotline. Religion often plays a role in the anguish of parents who call, she says. "It's a constant thread that runs through everyone's fears. It's been hammered in for decades."

Holladay stresses that not all Christians reject GLBT people. She believes one of the greatest tragedies of modern religion is the mistaken idea among many believers that a person can't be gay and Christian.

Certainly the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints clings to that idea with a vengeance. Bryan Olfen, 21, grew up Mormon, a religion he says counts homosexual acts and murder as the two most abominable sins. After coming out in high school he was sent by his parents to a Mormon-run "behavioral modification" boarding school in Mexico in the hope that they could "fix" him.

The program, specializing in delinquents, wasn't billed as ex-gay, but Olfen says it was an unspoken understanding that they could "deal" with gay kids. For the four months he was there, he met weekly with a psychologist, who said he believed Olfen would "come around." The program took a rigid approach, and Olfen says it was shut down on abuse allegations in 2003 by the Mexican government.

Olfen only escaped the program after he wrote home to his parents to tell them he was "cured" and had met a girl there he liked.

Health pros say gay youth are A-OK

Guess which highly respected professional health organizations in the United States think the whole reparative therapy movement is a dangerous lie? All of them—including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychiatric Association, the National Association of School Psychologists, and the National Association of Social Workers. (We don't count rogue "professional" groups established by antigay activists or religious groups.)

In an official statement, the APA said, "The most important fact about 'reparative therapy' ... is that it is based on an understanding of homosexuality [as a mental disorder] that has been rejected by all the major health and mental health professions...."

"[H]ealth and mental health professional organizations do not support efforts to change young people's sexual orientation through 'reparative therapy' and have raised serious concerns about its potential to do harm." Find the complete statement at www.advocate.com.



Top 5 "ex-gay" exposés

Anything But Straight

(book, 2003) Wayne Besen's acclaimed and engaging work debunks "ex-gay" myths, including reparative therapy and the political movement built on supposed ex-gay "success" stories.

But I'm a Cheerleader (1)

(movie, 1999) This dark comedy about an all-American teen (Natasha Lyonne) sent off by her parents for "sexual redirection" is set at a camp run by Cathy Moriarty and RuPaul.

Doin' Time in the Homo No Mo Halfway House

(one-man show, 2005) Peterson Toscano recounts his days inside the Christian ex-gay movement, portraying everything from being outed in Africa to living in the Homo No Mo Halfway House.

One Nation Under God (3)

(documentary, 1993) "Ex-lesbians" learn the benefits of makeovers while "ex-homosexuals" play football in this unintentionally funny and alarming doc.

Saved! (2)

(movie, 2004) In this charming comedy about the Christian fundamentalist youth movement, a boy is sent off to an ex-gay camp—where he finds love.



He says he waxed poetic about how much the program showed him about himself and how he was ready to come home and live a straight life. Upon arriving home, he went back to his closet, where he stayed for another year.

He began dating his current partner when he was 17, after which he came out to his parents again and was told he needed to leave their home. Being gay was not OK in his family's house.

Olfen is now a junior and a Point Foundation scholar at Emory University in Atlanta. The foundation awards scholarships to GLBT youths with leadership qualities who have been financially disenfranchised by their families.

"It's very damaging," says Olfen of ex-gay programs. "I think the thing that saved me was that I had come out early enough that I had enough exposure with the gay community to know this world is out there. Had I not known that, I think it would have been much worse."

Today, Olfen lives happily with his partner of over three years in Atlanta. ■

Griffith is bureau chief for the Orlando Sentinel.

CHEERLEADER: MARK LIPSON; SAVED! DIVYAH PENA; ONE NATION: P. O'V.