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NORTHWEST news

Surviving the ex-gay movement

Continued from Page 1

In the eyes of his Baptist church there only could be one answer. "They made it clear I didn't have a choice," Strouse recalls 16 years later. "I was unable to be a good father or husband. I was starving to be acceptable to the church. I would have given my teeth to be straight."

The church officials held the promise of acceptance through change, and Strouse agreed to their conditions. "It was wonderful. I felt relieved. I would get 'cured.' "

to water-ski at summer camp. Their parents were also there, as was the teen-ager who had revealed Strouse's homosexuality to church leaders.

Also in attendance were his closest friends and his staff members. Everyone who mattered to him.

Strouse began to speak in his deep, preacher's voice. "When I was 12 years old, I met this man who worked at a gas station. Later I returned, and we went into the bathroom together. Then I went over to his house."

Strouse never told the congregation that he and the man spent time talking and that they never had intercourse. Although they did touch each other, he did not consider the experience horrible at all. "I enjoyed it," he recalls.

But the story he told the church was different. "Any moderately sexual relationship I had with a man was considered rape," Strouse explains. "So I told them I was raped. That's what they wanted me to say."

Strouse explained homosexuality, using the Baptist definition. "Homosexuality is a man's desire to love himself," he said. "It occurs when a man's own maleness has not been accepted...only when a man fully accepts his maleness in its own right will he begin to experience desires emerging for the



Strouse at home in Vancouver, Wash.

Strouse looks down into his closed fist. When he speaks again, his voice shrinks to a whisper, as if in prayer. "But I was wrong, of course."

It's a dilemma gay men and lesbians often face: The challenge to conform or even transform themselves in the face of a closed society that does not accept who they are and does not believe sexual orientation is as much a part of their identity as, say, the color of their skin. The rite of passage Pastor Strouse endured might cause all of us to value our lives more.

THE CONFESSION

To begin the "healing process," Strouse delivered a detailed confession of his "heinous homosexual sins" to his congregation of deeply religious Baptists.

The sanctuary was silent, he recalls. No coughs. No movement in the pews. Only 300 transfixed faces staring up at Strouse. "I'd never seen the church so packed and so quiet."

His children and wife refused to attend the confession. They couldn't abide the humiliation.

But in the crowd were other youth the pastor knew well—he even had taught many of them

opposite of himself."

He told them how he had tried to accept his maleness, how for 10 years he attended Exodus, a group in Vancouver, British Columbia, that promised to cure him: But he failed. He wasn't strong enough. However, he would continue to do everything he could to change.

Finally, Strouse finished. The room remained silent. A brave few got up, gave him hugs and wished him luck.

At school, his son was harassed: "I bet your daddy fucks you." Just 48 hours after the confession, Strouse moved his family to another town.

"We couldn't stand it," he remembers. "We left as fast as we could."

It would take eight months for him to break free from the devils in disguise.

THE "CURE"

Every week, Strouse came to the Southeast Portland office of a conservative criminal psychologist who worked with sex offenders. The church agreed to pay for half of the counseling costs.

"He said the more honest I was, the more it would help, but by being homosexual I was

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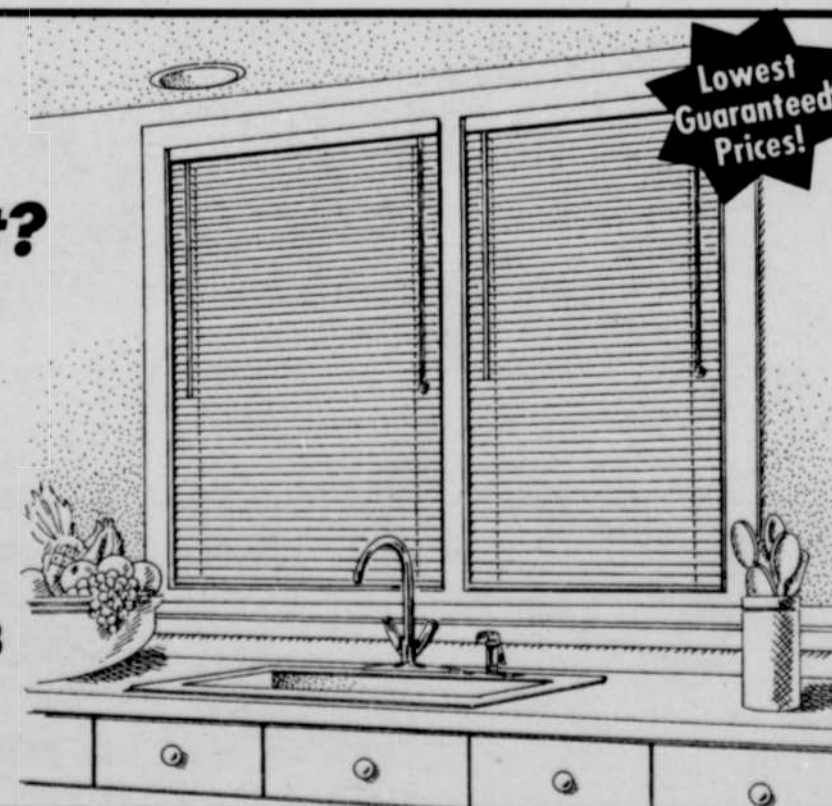
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