

automatically guilty," Strouse recalls. "He regarded me as a sex offender and made sure I knew it."

Strouse's voice becomes fierce. "It was horrible. He didn't think I was trying hard enough. He didn't think I was sincere. But I was sincere. I was doing everything to change. How could he know I was not sincere?"

The psychologist gave Strouse homework and made him redo it when he was not specific enough. The first assignment was the "Step One Inventory," which outlined his year-by-year sexual history, starting from elementary school and ending about 30 years later. These entries gave explicit detail, recalling when and what he did and how he did it.

He also was forced to fill out a log recording his daily progress, and the psychologist scrawled comments in the margins. On Nov. 28, 1985, Strouse wrote: "Struggled with masturbation this morning. I watched a movie and there was an erotic scene." The comment in the margin reads, "Minimization—you did masturbate, right?"

Strouse was told this information was private, but he later learned it all was relayed back to his church leaders.

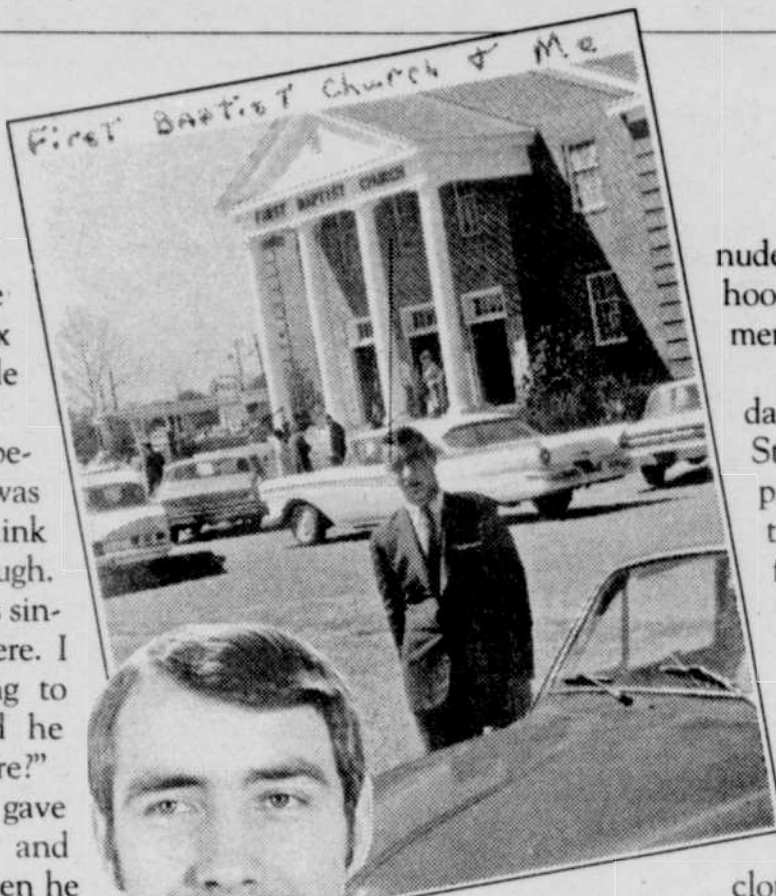
He also attended Portland Fellowship, a confession group. "In a way, it was liberating," he recalls. "There were all these gay men there that had the same problem...I didn't feel so alone. I started to think maybe I couldn't do anything about the way I am."

During the meetings, the men would sing hymns, confess their sins and fill out worksheets. The group facilitator constantly told them, "Only when you accept the truth will you get set free."

Strouse explains: "They thought [the phrase] meant that I'd be set free once I figured out how to be heterosexual. The irony is, the more they suppressed me, the more I wanted to act out."

He grins recalling what else he learned there. "I found out about places I could go and do crazy stuff. That's where I heard about Rooster Rock."

So one day after eight months of the Baptist cure for homosexuality, Strouse got in his car and drove to the state park. Rooster Rock, just east of Portland on the Columbia River, is famous for its



Strouse circa 1976 and in front of the Crestview, Fla., church he attended as a teen-ager



nude beach and as a hookup place for gay men.

It was a calm, sunny day in August when Strouse arrived at the park. He wanted to take his clothes off but felt too embarrassed. "I really wanted someone to talk to," he recalls.

Finally, he climbed up onto the dry sand and took off his clothes. A man sat down

beside him. They inched closer and closer to each other.

"I thought, 'Pray for the inevitable, relax and enjoy it,'" Strouse recalls. "The rejection by the church and the suppression of my homosexuality created an enslavement. Only when I accepted who I was and found healthy ways to express myself did I experience freedom."

THE RENEWAL

After going to Rooster Rock, Strouse rejected his "treatment" plan, rewrote his life and got a doctor of his own. His church excommunicated him, so he found an accepting congregation to attend.

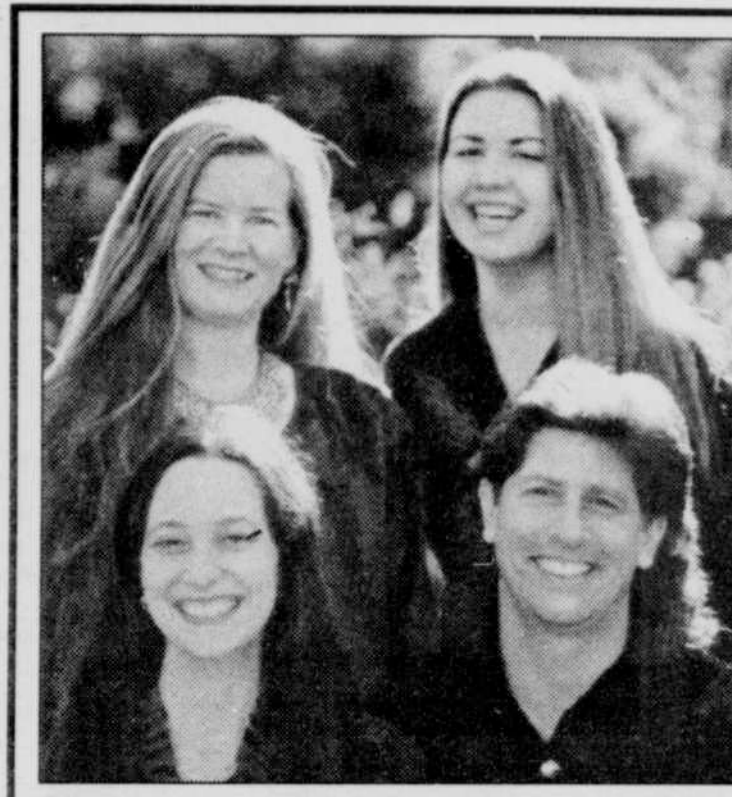
Remarkably, Strouse and his wife remained close. Even during the divorce, there was no sentiment of revenge or anger.

Strouse and his wife are now best friends and talk to each other regularly. Although no longer a minister, he has settled into his new life with his partner of several years and attends the Anawim Gay Men's Prayer Group.

He has a piece of advice for anyone who is going through what he suffered. "If you ever find yourself in a place that's trying to change you, get away from it as fast as you can." He points out that all of the men he has encountered who were part of the ex-gay movement shared one thing in common: They did not change; they never were "cured."

Strouse, a minister who needed to find his own special passage through purgatory, has one final piece of advice for anyone who would seek to escape the fires of hell by betraying himself: "It's not worth it. It's like slavery. Find a place where you can be yourself." □

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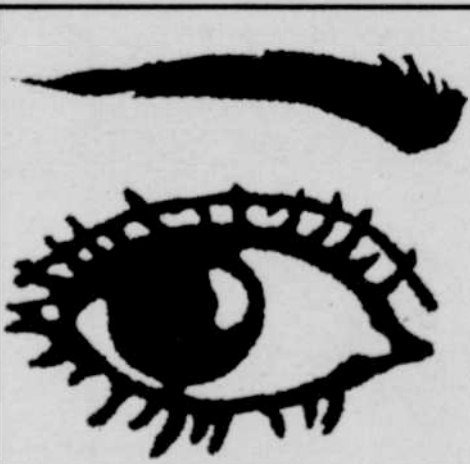
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