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Feature

Ex-Gay. *Evergreen's Promise, One Man's Struggle*

by Joel Shoemaker



Russ Gorringer remembers the moment he almost lost his life to his fight against being gay.

"I had determined that the only way out was to end my life," Gorringer says he was hiking with his wife and children in Glacier National Park when they crossed a swinging rope bridge over a river ravine. "To make it look like an accident, I knew all I'd have to do is slip. If the fall didn't kill me, a quick breath of the water would."

Gorringer made sure he went last across the bridge. He waited for his family to go just out of sight, and then made his move.

"But as I was just going down, my daughter Emily turned around and

looked at me," he says. "Our eyes met. She knew exactly what I was doing. And I thought, 'I just can't let her know that I did this on purpose.' I had to wait for another time to make it look like an accident." He says she helped pull him up from where he was about to fall into the ravine. He credits his daughter for saving his life that day, she was 14 years old.

Gorringer says that moment, and the following years where he questioned everything that had brought him to that place, came only after decades of trying to reconcile his homosexuality.

Having grown up Mormon, he says his earliest memories were of being gay and with no one to talk to about those feelings: "Years later I would discover that my closest friends from grade school through college were gay."

He dated women in high school, but says the further he went with a girl sexually, the more it felt unnatural. He served a mission in Indiana, knowing he was attracted to men, "but I thought it was a temporary condition. I relied on the phrase 'faith precedes miracles.' I had complete faith I would be changed. When I wasn't, I felt I had been failed a miracle."

After his mission, he got married, having gotten advice from church leaders that his attractions would go away. "I was given bad advice," he says. Three years into the marriage, Gorringer told his wife about his attractions to men. A long period followed where Gorringer tried everything to get his feelings to change.

"I get so angry when people say, 'Oh well you just didn't try hard enough.' That's just not true." Gorringer says he spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on reparative therapy, trying to change his sexual attractions. "This was my big wound to heal. There was an emptiness inside me that was killing me."

One hallmark of his efforts was deep involvement with the LDS teachings-based organization Evergreen International, which marked its 14th Annual Conference September 17-18. Part of a broader group of religion-based organizations that attempt to help individuals resolve conflicts over same-sex attraction (Courage for Catholics, Exodus for Protestants), Evergreen uses the teachings of the Mormon Church to guide its members away from homosexual "behavior."

Gorringer says the same BYU therapist who tried to get him turned onto women by introducing him to “girlie” magazines was also the first to recommend Evergreen. Even though the group has been criticized by many for trying to change gay and lesbian people, Gorringer says it gives its members more positive than some immediately think.

“In some ways it was good. It got me talking about these issues with other men where I hadn’t before. It was a bridge.”

A Resource and Information Organization

The small offices of Evergreen International on 300 South in Salt Lake City are just a few doors down from the irreverently-named bar “The Tabernacle” — named after the LDS Tabernacle on Temple Square.

The office door is not grandly marked — just a simple printed sign with the organization name typed in green letters. Along with a single receptionist, a wall of books and reference materials greet you as you enter. Some of the titles include Homosexuality and the Church of Jesus Christ and Emotional Dependency and Developing Genuine Friendships: A Guide for Women Struggling with Same-Sex Attraction.

David Pruden, Evergreen’s Executive Director, has been involved with the organization for nine years. “Evergreen was like AA [Alcoholics Anonymous]. It started with people who got together and said, ‘We need help.’ It was them trying to live the scriptures and trying to do good.” Founded in the summer of 1989, the organization got considerable media attention with its first conferences.

The group is non-profit, and as can be seen by the contrast between Evergreen’s humble offices and the vast sky-rise office space of the LDS Church, the organization is not officially a part of that church, although it has strong ties. Pruden says Evergreen’s board of directors include church leaders, therapists and “strugglers” (the term used to describe those struggling with their sexual identity).

The organization’s purpose is to serve as a resource, he says. “Our job is to help the bishops, elders and others who are helping those who are struggling and who want to live LDS standards.”

According to the mission statement, Evergreen attests that individuals can overcome homosexuality and diminish same-sex attraction. Evergreen provides a website, an information line, books, pamphlets and an annual conference to help members achieve that goal.

What Evergreen is not, Pruden says, is a political organization with any desire to get involved in political debates. Pruden is adamant about not even commenting on timely debates like the proposed state constitutional amendment on November’s general election ballot that would ban same-sex marriage as well as legal recognition of domestic partnerships.

“Most of my people have been beat up a lot — through relationships, in their family, even by other church members. We don’t want to continue that by engaging into political, argumentative dialogue. That’s not what we’re about,” he says. “There are people who are there for a political fight. That’s why God made Gayle Ruzicka.”

Pruden says the group doesn’t work to divide lines between groups, and hopes that just as Evergreen supports those who choose to have a gay-affirming opportunity, he hopes others will support Evergreen members as they move through their process. He says the goal of Evergreen is not to evangelize their message, but to just be there for those who seek it. “We have no interest in turning this into something hateful, we’re not looking for a fight.”

Pruden refused a request to refer members of the organization to be interviewed for this article.

One Therapist’s View

Dr. Lee Beckstead is an openly gay practicing therapist working with individuals who are in conflict with their sexual orientation. His work has put him on the forefront of the subject, having published in the trade publication *The Counseling Psychologist* and in publications for the American Psychological Association. His own personal struggle with sexual orientation identity took him through Evergreen as well. [Beckstead also contributes to Salt Lake Metro’s “Sane Advice” column.]

Beckstead categorizes two types of individuals who struggle with sexual identity: “On one side, there are those who accept their gayness. On the other, there are those who say, ‘No, gay is not for me.’”

According to Beckstead, “It’s ‘out-gays’ on one side, ‘ex-gays’ on the other.” Reparative therapy, he says, is born from therapists who look to treat the people who don’t want to be gay. “They say, ‘Here are these clients who don’t want to be gay; I can help them.’”

It’s from this idea that the religious groups like Exodus, Evergreen and others have been born, he says.

Beckstead points out that groups such as these do have their positive aspects: “These people share these thoughts, meet each other and find support, something they didn’t necessarily have before.” The groups serve a purpose of bringing together individuals

who have many times felt isolated and shamed by their feelings. In these groups, they have an opportunity to speak openly about their struggles with others that have struggled too. "When they meet the like-minded people, it helps to validate them."

It also helps affirm their religious beliefs and family relations — things that are sometimes thrown out in gay-affirmative therapy, Beckstead says. He also notes that the behavioral strategies that often accompany reparative therapy can be desirable, helping people to stop undesirable behaviors and helping them function in the lives they want to lead.

But the crux of the matter is that therapy cannot change attraction — only limit it. "Their sexual orientation does not change, but their sexuality does," says Beckstead.

The theory behind reparative therapy is flawed: "The idea is that we didn't get enough love from our peers, our parents, and that we got 'stuck' and sexualized those needs," says Beckstead. "You're really a hetero with homosexual problems. Personally, I went through this and kept thinking, 'My father is to blame?'"

While Beckstead says the therapy can serve to heal gender inferiority, it falls short of giving what many who pursue the therapy really want: to become straight.

Instead of taking the individual from a place where they have same-sex attraction to a place where they have opposite-sex attraction, it makes people asexual. "So in a sense, the therapy is what pedophiles do," says Beckstead. "It's a managing technique instead of acting out. ... It gets them only to fit into certain ethics and values."

Beckstead points out that reparative therapy can also be harmful in many ways: "Initial hopes turn sour; the hope to become straight doesn't happen; they internalize failure causing more depression, hatred and suicidality. In short, it's just too simplistic."

Beckstead says his approach to therapy with clients is to basically let the client lead the way, and to be there to affirm and give information. He says he doesn't discourage clients from pursuing Evergreen, but helps them process the information they get from the organization.

His therapy approach of letting the client choose his or her own path reflects Beckstead's feelings that out gay people should be more understanding of those who pursue reparative therapy.

"We have this knee-jerk reaction of invalidation, that our feelings are threatened by these people, rather than hearing their stories and accepting them." For some people, he says, being out can bring just as many restrictive choices as reparative therapy. "We have to build connections, build bridges. We do the same thing to bisexuals. The whole ex-gay movement is really about 'hear me out, validate me' which is what out gays want, too."

First Kiss

Gorringer says he remembers the first time he kissed another man.

"In 25 years of marriage, my wife and I had four children but I never 'French kissed' her," he says. "But when I was employed at Weber State University, I was working with this colleague, and an attraction built up between us."

"Then one day, he kissed me. When that happened, every single cell in my body came alive! I thought 'Oh my gosh, I get it! No wonder they write poetry about kissing!'"

That moment actually came before Gorringer got involved with Evergreen.

Now, having divorced his wife (they still remain extremely close, he says), he says he tells his story to help the next generation. He's the subject of the documentary *Marriages, Hopes, Realities* and has been interviewed by the *Deseret Morning News*. He works heavily with the spiritual group *Reconciliation*, geared for those raised with LDS teachings. He says he hopes people keep God in their life when they come out.

"I love being gay. It's brought me great joy."