

THE UTAH BEE



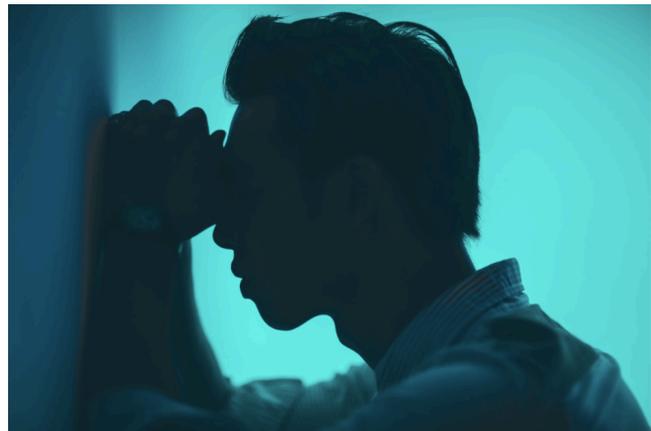
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Utah Bill will Outlaw Gay “Conversion” Therapy

By Rich Kane

Josh Burningham, a married 33-year-old Utahn with four kids, was wrestling with feelings of same-sex attraction.

On the advice of his bishop in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, he contacted a therapist, and for the next two years became involved in programs he was told would help him cope with being gay, if not outright “cure” him of his desires.



There were one-on-one and group counseling sessions aimed at LDS church members by organizations with names like Evergreen International and North Star, where therapists would try to pinpoint incidents in Burningham’s childhood he was told caused him to be gay.

There were weekend-long intensive retreats held by Journey Into Manhood, a group co-founded by David Matheson — more about him later — where the men played sports and engaged in activities they were told would make them more masculine.

None of it worked.

“At the time, I had a big desire to maintain my family unit the way it was,” says Burningham. “But it was getting to be too much for my wife, so she wanted to divorce. Once divorce was imminent, I felt there wasn’t a point to continue doing those programs that weren’t helping me be any less gay.”

These “conversion” therapies also triggered deep depression. Burningham says there were several times he was suicidal.

“I didn’t know how to deal with the feelings of failing this program and not being able to make it work, the stress of trying to be someone I ultimately wasn’t,” he says.

Now at age 43 — and no longer an LDS church member — Burningham is speaking out against these types of therapies, and he’s not alone. During the upcoming Utah state legislative session, which begins Monday, Jan. 28, a bill will be introduced that will ban any state-licensed therapist from using any kind of gay conversion methods.

The ban, however, will not apply to adult patients, only to children under 18. It also won’t affect any church-sanctioned therapies or non-state-licensed counselors, which could cross church-state separation lines.

“It’s important for the youth,” says Burningham. “As an adult, I had a lot more maturity and a good network to help me, and not all youths do. It’s really dangerous for kids to be forced into these programs. They probably want to please their parents and do what they think is the right thing. I was able to do that for years just trying to be what I thought everyone wanted me to be, but ultimately it just caused a lot of heartache.”

In a time when gender is increasingly acknowledged to be less black-and-white and more fluid than thought, the idea of going to a therapist to change your sexual orientation may seem bizarre. But such practices — sometime involving extreme methods as electric shock therapy — have existed for decades, before and after 1973, when the American Psychiatric Association declared that homosexuality was not a mental illness.

Much like what Burningham experienced, such therapies have often lead to feelings of depression and suicide among people who have tried to “pray away the gay,” as these programs are often derisively branded.

“There’s an urgency to pass this law now because of Utah’s high suicide rates,” says Troy Williams, Executive Director of Equality Utah, which is helping to write the bill. Williams cites a recent study published in the Journal of Homosexuality that examined the impact of conversion therapy, which showed that suicide rates for LGBTQ youths who go through conversion therapy are three times greater than LGBTQ youths who don’t.

“For us, this legislation is a suicide prevention measure,” Williams says. “I know the state is very concerned about these issues, so we’re offering this as a way the state can act to bring these numbers down. There are multiple factors contributing to the suicide rates, and therefore, multiple solutions. This is one of them.”

Williams is optimistic that the bill, once introduced, will pass both houses of the legislature and be signed into law by Gov. Gary Herbert. He says it also helps that the

LDS church in 2016 branded as “unethical” any therapy that focuses on changing sexual orientation.

Such laws are also the logical outcome of a public-education wave that began in 2013 when California banned gay conversion therapy. Fifteen states have since followed suit, as have hundreds of cities and municipalities. Popular culture has also consistently brought the issue to a wide audience going back to the 1999 comedy “But I’m a Cheerleader” and in films like last year’s “Boy Erased” and the Sundance-winning “Miseducation of Cameron Post.”

Williams does expect some opposition once the proposed bill is released, mostly from people who aren’t educated enough on the topic.

“It’s obviously a challenge to move something like this through a Republican-controlled legislature, but we’ve done it before,” Williams says. “There are people who think this is in the past and isn’t still happening, so there’s a huge degree of learning that needs to happen with lawmakers.”

Indeed, just two weeks ago, an attorney in Maryland announced plans to sue that state’s governor and attorney general, saying the conversion therapy ban there violated his right to free speech, practice of religion, and the rights of clients “to prioritize their religious and moral values above unwanted same-sex sexual attractions, behaviors, or identities.”

“The people who’ll be against the Utah bill will be the same people who are always against it,” says Michael Bussee, a retired therapist in Riverside, California. “The two arguments they’ll use is that clients should be able to exercise their freedom of choice, and if they don’t want to live a ‘gay lifestyle,’ then they should be able to get the support they need to not do that. They’ll also say these bans are an unfair intrusion into the therapeutic process.”

Bussee knows a few things about conversion therapy. In 1976, he co-founded Exodus International, one of the first organizations that claimed conversion therapy was possible. But in 1979, he left the group after falling in love with Gary Cooper, another Exodus co-founder. The men divorced their wives and held a commitment ceremony in 1982. Their story is detailed in the 1993 documentary film “One Nation Under God.”

There’s actually a long list of gay-conversion therapists and spokespersons who have been down the same path as Bussee. In 1998, John Paulk, who at the time was the chairman of Exodus, appeared on the cover of Newsweek as part of a story on ex-gay groups. Two years later he was spotted in a gay bar and eventually came out as gay. He’s since renounced his involvement with Exodus and apologized.

In 2011, John Smid, a former director of the ex-gay ministry Love in Action who also claimed to have changed from gay to straight, announced he was still gay and said he had “never met a man who experienced a change from homosexual to heterosexual.” (The character Victor Sykes in “Boy Erased” is partly based on Smid.)

And just last week, David Matheson, a prominent Mormon, former director of Evergreen International and a major proponent of conversion therapy, announced that he was now seeking to date men, saying that he realized he “couldn’t stay in my marriage any longer. And I realized that it was time for me to affirm myself as gay.”

“These programs are not just ineffective, they’re based on deep-seated homophobia against gay people and fundamentalist religious views that say you’ll go to hell if you’re true to your sexual orientation,” says Bussee. “It’s a very damaging message. I encounter people every day who went through these programs 30 and 40 years ago and still can’t get that message of guilt and shame out of their heads.”

Not just for people who’ve gone through conversion therapy, Bussee says, but for the ones who headed those programs as well.

“A lot of us ex-gay leaders, we have a private support group just for us,” says Bussee. “It takes a while to come to terms with the fact that you spread a message that was very harmful and to take responsibility for that. To let yourself feel the remorse, because you want to convince yourself that what you did, you did out of good intentions, that you were just trying to do what you believe God was telling you to do, which is not act on gay feelings.

“And really, the first responsibility of any therapist should be to do no harm.”

Rich Kane is a veteran journalist who has written for the Los Angeles Times, Spin magazine, Salt Lake City Weekly, a bunch of websites that no longer exist, and album liner notes for punk rock bands. He was most recently a staffer at the Salt Lake Tribune until the Great Purge of 2018. He can be reached at rkane29@gmail.com or through his portfolio site at richkanemedia.com.