

To: Senate Committee on Human Services and Early Childhood
From: Norman Birthmark, 3705 SE 16th Ave., Portland, OR 97202
Re: HB 2307 Youth Mental Health Protection Act
Date: April 28, 2015

My name is Norman Birthmark. I was born and raised in Portland, where I still live. I strongly support House Bill 2307, the Youth Mental Health Protection Act.

In 1995, I shared that I was gay with a student group during my freshman year at Oregon State University. Like many LGBT teens, coming out was a very traumatic experience. I felt completely vulnerable revealing my deepest, darkest secret at a time when there were no out gay people in my classes.

The campus group referred me to the Portland Fellowship, an ex-gay Christian ministry. I went through a two-year program called *Taking Back Ground*, which included one-on-one and group counseling about how to overcome homosexuality through various techniques including conversion therapy. I also regularly saw a licensed professional therapist, who was on the Portland Fellowship's board.

I was 19 years old, had never experienced counseling before, and never considered questioning or challenging the expertise of the people who counseled me. **I trusted them.** However, the more I committed myself to the program and the work of this therapist, the more I eventually realized the counseling was far more harmful than helpful.

Instead of empowering or affirming me, I felt more guilt and shame about my attractions. I was counseled to question the supposed root causes of my natural attractions. Before the counseling, I was proud of the way I was raised; however, the counseling convinced me that my attractions were a sign that I came from a broken home. Before the counseling, I felt like a relatively normal guy; however, the counseling convinced me that my sexuality was a sign that I actually lacked masculinity and needed to find a male role model. And before the counseling, I felt relatively confident; however, the counseling convinced me that my sexuality was a sign that I was socially and psychologically stunted.

After two years with this therapist, I completely lost my self-confidence and eventually dropped out of school. It took me several years to rebuild my identity and self-confidence—far longer than the time I spent in the ex-gay program. Thankfully, I found the support of others who experienced these harmful practices. Today, I'm happily partnered and we have been together for nine years now.

I know firsthand that conversion therapy can cause great harm, especially to vulnerable youth. No LGBT teen should be told by a professional therapist to be ashamed of their natural, normal, healthy attractions. The state should protect LGBT teens from these harmful, unproven, and unneeded practices. I urge this committee to vote in support of HB 2307, so we can protect future generations from this cruel practice.

Sincerely,
Norman Birthmark, 3705 SE 16th Ave., Portland, OR 97202