

To: Senate Committee on Human Services and Early Childhood
From: Paul Southwick, 4944 N Commercial Ave, Portland, OR, 97217
Re: HB 2307 Youth Mental Health Protection Act
Date: April 28, 2015

My name is Paul Southwick and I strongly support House Bill 2307, the Youth Mental Health Protection Act.

One night, while a student at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon, I woke up suddenly, feeling frightened. A tingling sensation began overtaking my body, first in my hands and arms, then in my feet and legs. I couldn't breathe, or speak. I felt I might be dying. After being rushed from campus to the hospital in an ambulance, a doctor told me I had experienced a panic attack. I was 20 years old. Shortly after this distressing experience, I entered conversion therapy for the first time. I entered conversion therapy because my panic attack was caused by the extreme anxiety I felt about my same-sex attractions. I needed some help, so I turned to professionals who I trusted to help me.

I first experienced conversion therapy at my on-campus counseling center. My therapist was a graduate student who was supervised by a licensed professional. We spoke about my anxiety, depression and same-sex attractions. During our sessions, he did not treat me for my anxiety or depression. Rather, he tried to help me overcome my homosexual orientation and to acquire a heterosexual orientation. When I asked for his advice as to how I could make this switch happen, he suggested I watch heterosexual pornography in the hopes of arousing sexual desire for women. His advice only increased my confusion, anxiety and depression.

My second experience with conversion therapy was through a licensed therapist in Gresham, Oregon. Someone recommended him as specializing in conversion therapy. We had a few sessions but ended our professional relationship after he told me he was not sure I could be cured. He should have followed that statement up by saying that I did not need a cure, but he did not offer me that assurance. I left his care feeling angry and defeated.

My final involvement with conversion therapy was through the Portland Fellowship, an ex-gay program in Southeast Portland I attended for two years. Several members of the staff taught us about the roots of male homosexuality, focusing on things like childhood sexual abuse and our relationships with our fathers and mothers. The goal of the program was to graduate two years later cured of homosexuality and able to enter into heterosexual relationships (like the leaders of the program had done). I did not attend my graduation ceremony because the anxiety and depression I experienced during my panic attacks had only intensified during the program, and my sexual attraction to men had not diminished.

It took two years after my last experience of conversion therapy for me to come out as a gay man. It took several more years for me to lose the shame associated with my sexual orientation. When you are in conversion therapy, you are taught that you have a sickness, a pathology, and that you need a cure. When the cure never comes, you are left even more anxious, hopeless and ashamed than when you started.

Not once, in all my forms of therapy, did anyone tell me that I was okay, that my desires were a normal, common and healthy part of my life. It takes some time to heal and to forgive after these kinds of experiences. I am now in a place where I have forgiven the trusted professionals who harmed me. But I have not forgotten the pain of the experiences and I do not want any young LGBTQ people to spend any amount of time needlessly feeling like they have a sickness without a cure. I urge this committee to vote in support of HB 2307, so we protect future generations.

Thank you,
Paul Southwick, 4944 N Commercial Ave, Portland, OR, 97217