

Living 'without the gay'

MEDAN LOVETT PHOTOS — THE DAILY PROGRESS



Greene County resident Rich Wyler leads the nonprofit People Can Change, which, along with his Journey Into Manhood camps, tries to take a non-judgemental, non-religious approach to trying to help men overcome, or at least manage, same-sex attraction.

Local man's camps try to help those who wish to be straight

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From his Greene County home, Rich Wyler has spent eight years organizing private weekend camps throughout the country to rid men of sexual attraction to other men.

Wyler, the founder of the nonprofit

People Can Change, has hosted camps throughout the United States and in England, including several in the Charlottesville area. More than 1,300 men have attended.

Many participants in the Journey Into Manhood camps blame their gay feelings on childhood experiences.

Some were molested. Others felt

shunned by male adults or peers.

Like Wyler, most of Wyler's volunteer staff members have fought same-sex attraction.

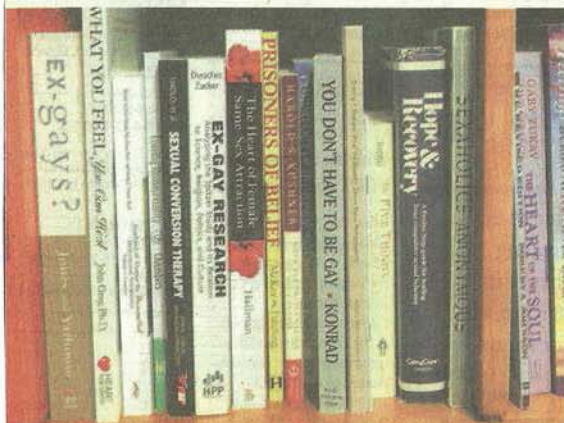
Some participants believe bad childhood experiences caused a disconnect with men, which sparked homosexual attractions, as a way of filling the need for male bonding.

"Every person needs to identify with their gender and connect with others from their gender, and unconsciously, a way to do that is sexually," Wyler said.

Many scholars argue there's little proof gay-to-straight therapy works. They say such programs can, instead, inflict deep psychological wounds.

Dr. Jack Drescher, of the American Psychiatric Association, said setting out to change others' sexual orientation can be dangerous. When conversion camp participants fail to eliminate gay attraction, participants can conclude they are failures, or that God doesn't love them enough, which could cause more emotional distress or suicidal thoughts, Drescher contends.

"In a way, they are screwing with people's heads," Drescher said. "You have to be more careful, when you're screwing around with people's heads or their sex lives."



Titles such as "Leaving Homosexuality" and "You Don't Have to Be Gay" line Wyler's bookshelf. Wyler himself struggled with homosexual urges for much of his life.

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Gay

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But Wyler contends that many critics are ignoring the sexual reorientations for political reasons.

"They don't want us to choose our own path and to live out our lives the way we want," Wyler said. "They want us to join the gay cause."

Political war

Drescher served on an American Psychological Association task force that released a report last year concluding: "Efforts to change sexual orientation are unlikely to be successful and involve some risk." The report was largely based on six task force members' analysis of published studies.

Drescher said a culture war is brewing around questions of whether gays can be made straight. The religious right is mostly responsible for the notion that sexual orientation, unlike race, can be changed, he said.

He adds that religious and social conservatives argue sexuality is not an essential component of someone's being, which has political implications because conservatives use the logic to argue that gays shouldn't be awarded the same civil rights protections as other minorities.

Wyler counters that there's a pro-gay bias by the American Psychological Association and other national organizations that have become leading voices in discussions about sexual orientation. Fearing Journey Into Manhood would be marginalized by the news media and labeled anti-gay, Wyler has largely kept the program out of the public eye.



Rich Wyler said his life improved greatly once he conquered his homosexual leanings. "Today I live a life of purpose, mission and peace," he says on his program's introductory CD.

are able to brace for the intensity of the program.

In 2007, People Can Change conducted a survey of 497 men who had participated in Journey Into Manhood six months to five-and-a-half years prior. Of the 224 respondents, 79 percent reported a decrease in same-sex attractions and 58 percent reported an increase in heterosexual attractions, according to survey results. Additionally, 50 percent reported an increase in heterosexual behaviors, such as dating women, and 13 percent experienced enough change to consider themselves "straight."

About 90 percent reported feeling better about themselves, and 83 percent reported feeling more masculine.

Wyler said he doesn't believe "it's necessarily possible for everyone" to rid same-sex attraction, adding, "I certainly never say that anyone should change if they don't want to."

Homosexuality, evolution

Clinton Anderson, a psychologist and senior member of the American Psychological Association, organized the task force that explored whether gay reparative therapy is effective.

"I don't think, from our perspective, there's any scientific reason to think that such programs would be likely to change sexual orientation," Anderson said.

"Sexual orientation is a complex thing and people do, over the lifespan, appear to change, because there are people who become gay or lesbian later in life. So, it's possible that people would go in the other direction," Anderson said, adding that a change in sexual orientation is very unusual.

that, to be valid, there would have to also be a comparison group and results would have to be studied over a long period of time.

Mark Yarhouse, director of Regent University's Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity, said he recently completed a study indicating Christian sexual reorientation therapy allowed some participants to reduce same-sex attractions significantly — though there generally was not "a 180 degree change from gay to straight."

Yarhouse — who co-authored the book "Ex-gays?" — had 73 therapy participants with unwanted same-sex attractions complete questionnaires over the course of a few years, to measure changes in sexual attractions and behaviors.

The researchers deemed about 15 percent to be heterosexual three to four years following therapy, and a third of participants reported significant declines in homosexual attractions.

"[Sexual reorientation] is possible but probably not as common as those who provide the ministry think it is, and probably not as complete," Yarhouse said. "But for those people who say nobody has ever changed ... I think our evidence would speak against that too."

Participants' distress before and after therapy was also evaluated. "On average, if anything, there was some slight improvement," Yarhouse said.

Wyler's choice

Wyler said that overcoming his same-sex attractions has greatly improved his life. Wyler is a father of two teenagers and was married to his wife for 18 years before she died of cancer in 2006.

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eye.

"Most of the gay world would say the only solution is to embrace it, accept it and live it," Wyler said. "And if you're married — you know — divorce your wife, leave your kids and go with this life."

While that may be a solution for some, Wyler says, not everyone is willing to embrace homosexuality. He's convinced his camps have helped some men live happier lives by overcoming, or at least learning to manage, unwanted same-sex attraction.

Wyler is hoping to expand the camps to much of the world and run a camp each week. Participants pay \$650 for the weekend, which includes everything except transportation costs. Of the approximately 45 Journey Into Manhood weekends, four have been held in the Charlottesville area. There's a volunteer staff of about 20 and as many as 32 participants at each camp.

Participants of Journey Into Manhood say camp leaders don't call homosexuality sinful. Instead, the program sends a message that participants are valued people, regardless of whether they turn from homosexuality, according to participants.

Wyler is a member of a Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Albemarle County. However, his program is not affiliated with any religion. Most of the camp guides are men who have fought same-sex attraction — unlike many other programs in the U.S. that are operated by religious leaders or professional therapists.

Secret exercises

Ty Mansfield — a 32-year-old Texas man who married a woman several weeks ago — says he believes participating in Journey Into Manhood six years ago has helped him overcome his same-sex attraction.

Growing up, Mansfield said, he didn't have strong relationships with male peers. In a recent interview, he recalled a time in fifth grade when he wanted to give a male peer a hug, but he was turned

away by the boy, who then asked if he was gay.

As a young man, he dated women but felt "an intense need" to connect with men, so he started dating men for about a year in his mid-20s. The connection helped him find the emotional bond he was missing, he said.

But his faith caused Mansfield, a Mormon, to stop dating men. Journey Into Manhood taught him ways to become part of the male community, he said, "without the gay." Developing non-romantic relationships with men, Mansfield said, helped him increase his sense of masculinity.

An increase in self-confidence helped him turn his focus to women, eventually re-uniting with a schoolmate, now his wife.

Mansfield is a family therapy doctoral student and author of "In Quiet Desperation," a book on his experiences as a Mormon with same-sex attraction. Mansfield said his book aims to let people know God loves them regardless of their sexual orientation.

Days before getting married, Mansfield said he still found men attractive but did not feel burdened by that attraction.

"I can see a guy, and I can think he's really attractive," Mansfield said. "But I also don't feel like I

cause it was never shown to me, and in this program, in a very intensive weekend, it showed me ... how I basically set up a lot of self-destructive behaviors trying to meet those needs."

The man said some of the exercises in Journey Into Manhood that he found most effective were ones that allowed participants to "level the playing field" with other men, instead of being intimidated. Other exercises encourage participants to increase brotherhood with men. And leaders encourage participants to be truthful to themselves and their loved ones about who they are and what they're feeling.

"For the first time in my life, I was able to admit the physical and sexual abuse to other people," the Ohio man said. Nowadays, he has friendships with men and a stronger marriage. What had been nearly daily homosexual desires has been reduced to sightings of men he finds attractive only once every several weeks or so, he said.

Another participant, Sean, said that he was very sensitive as a boy, and his more rugged older brother constantly poked fun at him and hit him. In one camp exercise, one participant acted out the role of him and another played his brother. Sean

camp weekend, participants were told to perform a hold with each other that's similar to how a parent would hold a child, Cox said. Another hold involved one man leaning back into another's chest. The positions were not sexual in nature, Cox said, but he doesn't see how they could help someone become straight.

"I would think that some of the things we did at the camp would be counter-productive," said Cox, who called the weekend "literally the gayest thing I've ever done in my life."

Cox said the ex-gay movement is all about trying to find something in gays' lives that made them gay. As with other programs he's researched, Journey Into Manhood set out to find something that may explain why participants had same-sex attractions.

"They'll take any sort of negative event in your life, any kind of negative thing in your childhood and say, 'A-ha! That's why you're gay,'" Cox contended, claiming one participant struggled to come up with something in his life that made him feel isolated; the man then pointed to a time in childhood when his father shooed him away because he was reading a newspaper.

was then told to assess the situation and defend the actor pretending to be him as a child.

"I was able to confront my issues with my brother, which I thought [were] very damning to my self-esteem," Sean said. "So, I had to build my self-esteem back up."

Straight man undercover

Ted Cox, a freelance writer from Sacramento, Calif., who went to a Journey Into Manhood camp undercover, said many of the exercises were laughable at best and angering at worst. Cox, an atheist who opposes therapy designed to change sexual orientation, is writing a book about his research of gay-to-straight therapy.

Cox is a 32-year-old divorced man who says he's been straight his entire life.

At one point during a

The participant proceeded to act out beating his father with a bat, Cox said.

Wyler declined to respond in detail to Cox's reports because Cox had violated an agreement stating that experiences in the camp would remain confidential. Wyler said Cox has a clear agenda to destroy the group's reputation.

As for the non-sexual exercises involving male touching, Wyler said such exercises are effective for many men in the program because they were not hugged or touched in safe ways as children. For some, the need for heterosexual physical contact with men could be an underlying factor for why some pursue gay sex.

Wyler said he does not detail many of the exercises, because many are less effective if participants know what's coming and

in sexual orientation is very unusual.

For most people, sexual orientation emerges in early adolescence, he said.

"It comes, from their perspective, out of nowhere. It's just the way they are, and that doesn't really change over the life. On the other hand, sexual behavior does change," Anderson said.

As to why some people become gay in early adolescence, Anderson said: "I don't think we really know much about that beyond the very fact that it happens."

Anderson says some studies show gay adults are more likely to report that they had been sexually abused as children. However, those studies don't prove molestation causes homosexuality, Anderson contends.

It could be that children who express their sexuality "differently from the norm, may in fact, in some way, be more attractive to people who abuse children sexually."

Because there are many gay men who had reported feeling distant from their fathers and closer to their mothers, some psychiatrists in the late 1950s and early 1960s theorized that neglect from fathers caused men to become gay.

"The research has never really found good evidence

wife for 18 years before she died of cancer in 2006.

"Where before I was in pain, hating myself and my struggle, today I live a life of purpose, mission and peace," Wyler says on his CD introducing prospective participants to the program. "I am so thankful that I overcame this struggle in time for us to have many good years in our marriage together. I don't know how I would have forgiven myself if she had died and I was still struggling and still failing her as a husband."

Wyler said he believes few people choose to be gay, and that there is no evidence that people are born to be gay.

"The idea that anything like a gay gene or a biological cause has been found is a complete myth, promulgated by gay activists and a sympathetic media," Wyler says on the CD.

"While evidence for a genetic or biological cause is quite weak, evidence of developmental causes has remained consistent for decades."

What causes same-sex attraction varies, depending on the person, Wyler believes. But for some, high amounts of emotional sensitivity combined with bad childhood experiences can trigger same-sex attraction. That's what he believes happened with him.

in support of it," Anderson said of the theory. "But it's equally possible that why a father may be more distant from a son who is going to be gay in adulthood may be because the son is expressing that sexuality in some way that the father is perceiving and the father is not comfortable with, and therefore, is more distant."

Some men say gay-to-straight therapy led them to be rid of their same-sex attractions. But Anderson said that the studies that have been made public fall short of scientific standards.

In many cases, the participants have a desire for a particular result — to become straight. Coupled with the fact that many of the studies are being conducted by people who have a stake in the matter, Anderson said, makes it difficult to weigh the value of survey results. He said

He attributes the same-sex attractions that he had dealt with for much of his life to a childhood in which he lacked "a meaningful relationship" with his father and had an inborn sensitivity to peer ridicule.

Wyler said some gays assume he's suggesting gays "are broken or they should change."

"I'm not saying there's anything wrong with you," Wyler said. "But neither is there anything wrong with the men who come to us for support."

"It's that they want to make changes in their lives, and they should have the right to make those changes, just as gays have the right to live a gay life," Wyler said. "I hope that, one day, the people in gay communities will be secure enough in their own civil rights and their life situations that they won't be so threatened by those who choose different paths."