



From Gay to Straight? Controversial Retreat Helps Men Deal With 'Unwanted Attraction'

In a 'Nightline' Exclusive, Men Attend Therapeutic Camp to Confront and Overcome Homosexual Feelings

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When Preston met up with a bunch of his friends in New Caney, Texas, for a guys' weekend at a secluded camp, it wasn't for hunting or fishing. These men traveled here to attend emotional [counseling sessions](#) to cope with [unwanted sexual attraction](#) towards other men.

"To be able to connect from one man to another, with no facade, with no you know nothing holding back, it's just amazing," said Preston, a 28-year-old from outside of Salt Lake City, Utah. He requested only his first name be used.

The retreat called "Journey to Manhood" offers [therapeutic peer counseling](#) over 48 hours to help men like Preston, who voluntarily come to learn how to deal with what they call "same-sex attractions." For the first time ever, the retreat allowed cameras inside their controversial organization and ABC News was granted exclusive access.

Watch the full two-part exclusive story on "[Nightline](#)" tonight at 11:35 p.m.

"You walk into a room with these men and suddenly they know more about you than people your whole life have known about you," Preston said.

David Matheson, a counselor, and Rich Wyler, who referred to himself as a "life coach," founded the retreat in 2002. The two men say they have both overcome their own issues with "same-sex attraction" through years of their own therapeutic work.

Over the course of the weekend, they lead the participants in a variety of exercises to help them cope with what they say is a conflict between their sexual feelings and their personal values.

"For some people 'gay' is never going to work. That kind of life and that kind of living is never going to gel -- ever -- with their value system," Matheson explained. "For those men, that's why we exist, so that they can have another way, another approach of dealing with their sexual feelings."

"It can be dramatically transformative in a short amount of time," added Wyler. "We really welcome men from all ages, races, walks of life, religion or no religion. We've had men as young as 18 and well into their 60s."

The founders do not promise their clients they will transition from [being gay](#) to straight over night, but the overall goal is to give the men a foundation so they can work on making the change over time.

"It is truly a journey and it starts on one of these weekends," Preston said.

Visualizations and role play exercises are some of the techniques Wyler uses to help the men understand and accept their same-sex attractions, so that they can start to re-work their feelings.

"I want you to identify someone that you felt you had an attraction to recently, that you need to process," Wyler said to the attendees.

Retreat Participant: 'It Is Truly a Journey'

The cost for attending "Journey Into Manhood" is \$650 per weekend, not including travel expenses.



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Wyler said he has lead 50 retreats like this in 12 states across the country and in England as part of his larger outreach program, "People Can Change."

The particular weekend that ABC News documented was a reunion -- all of the men present had already attended at least one retreat in the past. Many of them are religious and married to women, and some have children. For the majority, their struggle with homosexuality is something they keep secret.

Preston said he remembered being interested in boys from an early age. But with a strong Mormon background, he feared rejection from family and friends and decided to keep his feelings private.

"Probably at around age 12...There was a curiosity about boys my age but it wasn't a problem until I was, you know, kind of taught that it was a problem," he said.

He said his first sexual encounter with another man didn't happen until he was 23.

"It used to be a very, very difficult and very shaming, 'disgusting' part of my life," he said. "It was incongruent with how I wanted to live and that was the hardest part."

Preston said a friend told him about the "Journey to Manhood" retreat three years ago and he decided to give it a try. He has been coming back ever since and praised the program for how it has helped him.

"It's been life changing. It's been a whole new take on life. It's been absolutely miraculous, for me personally," he said. "I feel some of the feelings or the attractions from time to time, you bet, that can be there. But I don't feel the compulsion anymore to have to pursue that."

Wyler's "People Can Change" program is built on the non-scientific premise that people can change their sexual orientation if they just "work" at it. It's part of the most recent wave of programs offering so-called "gay reparative therapy."

These approaches are not entirely new. Efforts to convert homosexuals to heterosexuals were widely accepted by the psychiatric community in the 1950s and '60s, when gays were often considered mentally ill. This idea is no longer accepted by the mainstream mental health community.

"The American Psychiatric Association's position since 1973, almost 40 years now, is that homosexuality is not a mental disorder. It is not something that requires psychological treatment," said Dr. Jack Drescher of the American Psychiatric

Association.

Psychologist Says 'Change' Therapy Is Controversial, Harmful

According to Drescher, "change" therapy is not legitimate from a clinical standpoint and mental health professionals warn it can actually be harmful.

"People spend a lot of time and money on these treatments that don't work," he said. Among the risks he mentioned were people blaming themselves for ultimately being unable to change, as well as people being encouraged to enter unfulfilling heterosexual marriages that often end in disaster.

"So many people report that they feel depressed, suicidal, anxious, and hopeless, those are not uncommon responses to a failed treatment," he said.

"Journey into Manhood" is an intensive 48 hours of what Wyler calls "deep emotional work." In one exercise, the men are asked to confront their old identities.

Preston attached a label to his chest that read "gay" and then ripped it off to show that it was no longer a label he accepted. He attached a new label that read "father" to illustrate his new aspirations.

Wyler put on music to inspire the men as they wore their new labels. "You feel the strength of that man, you know who you are," he preached. "The shadow, it is still there, but it has shrunk in the daylight of the new day sun; the identities that you welcome and embrace, that lift you up and make you the best man you can be."



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Such exercises are meant to build up a sense of "masculine" self-confidence.

Other activities include outdoor team-building exercises where the men are asked to walk blindfolded to teach them how to guide and trust one another. They are also asked to take a ride down a zip line attached to a 44-foot-tall tower as a way to learn how to confront their fears and "take a leap of faith."

"With same-sex attraction a lot of what keeps men from making the progress they want to make is not stepping into their fears. And when they can step into their fears -- start telling people, start asking for support...then they can start making some of the progress they were hoping to make," Wyler explained.

Later in the day, Wyler leads the men through an exercise where they get in touch with their "inner child." He plays children's music and tosses crayons onto the floor. He then instructs the participants to draw with their non-dominant hand so they can channel childhood memories and emotions.

"Part of that little boy is still in you today, welcome him," Wyler told the group. "Draw a picture of him, it might be him playing, it might be some event happening, or it might just be the energy that he held."

As in other "gay reparative" programs, the men are taught that their same-sex attractions are rooted in childhood traumas that pulled them away from male figures.

In order to change, Wyler says the men need to fulfill their needs for male attention through non-sexual platonic bonding.

"It's not about suppressing my same-sex attraction, it's about fulfilling it in non sexual gender affirming ways...we don't get rid of it, we transform it," said Wyler to the group of men.

Critics Say Retreat Doesn't Let Participants Accept Who They Are

Though he admits he is sometimes still sexually attracted to men, Preston says the retreat has helped him become much more attracted to his wife. But it hasn't been quick or easy.

"That's pretty hard to just, now I'm going to be attracted to women, now I'm going to be attracted to men -- that doesn't work." He said. "I've had to work on my sense of self and as a result the attraction has progressed."

Despite living in a world that is now more accepting of openly gay people and gay parents, Preston said it was still not the path he wanted.

"I could be a better father married to my wife and having children in those bounds," he said.

The retreat doesn't come without its controversies and not everyone supports what the "People Can Change" program is trying to accomplish.

Russ Baker-Gorrige is an outspoken critic of these programs, and said he had rare insight into such groups because he helped start one called "Evergreen".

"I feel very sorry for them. I understand it as someone who came from that same belief system," he said. "It took me 45 years of fighting with myself to accept who I was...that's a long time."

A faithful member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Gorrige was married to a woman for 25 years and had five children. He said he felt so much turmoil from hiding his homosexuality that he tried taking his own life.

"I think a person can live a heterosexual life even though they may be gay and they may have a different level of happiness but...they are not being true to themselves, they're not being a person of integrity because you're living a lie. You're very existence is a lie," he said.

Gorrige argued that such therapy is destructive not only to the young men who go through it, but also to the women who end up married to men with such conflicts.

"Forget what your church leaders have been telling



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you, forget the propaganda that you have been given, and listen to what your heart tells you," he said.

Once a poster boy for change therapy, Gorringer is now legally married to his husband, Joe, and uses his inside knowledge of groups like "People Can Change" to renounce them. "It doesn't work, it does not work," he said. "You cannot fix something that doesn't need to be fixed."

Former Clients Say Retreat Was 'Inappropriate'

While many of the men at the reunion retreat said "Journey Into Manhood" had a positive effect on their lives, some former clients told ABC News that the retreat left them traumatized.

Twenty-three old Ben Unger grew up in an Orthodox Jewish community in Brooklyn where he said being gay was not accepted. "I was in inner turmoil, I was tortured," said Unger, who attended one of Rich Wyler's retreats in Virginia in 2008.

"One thing that the therapy tried to instill in us is that it's impossible to be gay and happy," Unger said. "People who are gay are alcoholics and drug addicts and they are never in serious relationships...They just portray it as a really dark life and that scared a lot of us."

He said the participants were encouraged to "cuddle" with older staff members in an exercise that bordered on the homoerotic.

"They said we should view them as their father, like their daddy," he said. "I was thinking um, you know, if there are men here who claim to be ex-gay, but really they have feelings for men and they are cuddling with younger guys, I don't know what that means, I don't know how it can't be sexual."

Unger also described an exercise where the men were instructed to take off all their clothing. "So there was a naked man with a bunch of naked people surrounding him. At this point I left, I could not be part of the exercise."

Unger said the weekend left him feeling depressed and even suicidal because he was convinced it was his fault he wasn't changing.

He's not the only dissatisfied client. Chaim Levin, 21, a college student from Brooklyn, attended two "Journey Into Manhood" weekends in 2007 and 2008.

"I was very suggestive at the time," said Levin. "I had never spoken to anyone else about this at the time, so

as far as I was concerned, these were the experts."

Levin also described a degree of touching and cuddling that was not observed during the weekend ABC News was permitted to film.

"You were supposed to pick someone in the room to hold you like a child...They encouraged a lot of touch, they called it 'healthy touch,' but it looked very erotic in a lot of senses."

Both Unger and Levin said they are now openly gay and proud, and they strongly warn young people against change therapy programs.

"There is also the option of being truthful with yourself and being a happy person," Unger said.

According to Drescher, there is no scientific evidence that "healthy touch" exercises can help diminish same-sex attractions.

"I think these groups are playing with fire," he said. "The possibility that non-sexual contact can evolve into sexual contact is always there."

Baby on the Way

Despite outside critics, supporters of change therapy point to happy and satisfied clients like Preston, who's now been married four years. His wife Megan is completely supportive of his participation in "Journey Into Manhood" and all the work he has put into changing.

Speaking of their sex life she said, "I will be honest with that. It's wonderful."

Preston's therapy work is now more important than



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ever because the couple is expecting their first child. "What an opportunity," said Preston, "what a blessing."

Rich Wyler's Full Statement to ABC News Defending 'Journey into Manhood'

In response to claims made that "'Journey Into Manhood' didn't work for them," Wyler provided this statement: "People Can Change" has never suggested that all our participants will have 100 percent success. Indeed, heterosexuality is not necessarily even the end goal - peace, happiness, and brotherhood are.

However, in a survey, 4 out of 5 participants say their homosexual feelings have declined, and 9 out of 10 say they feel better about themselves, and that "Journey Into Manhood" has had a long-term positive effect on their lives. To us, that is success.

In response to claims made that "some exercises, like healthy touch, were inappropriate" Wyler provided this statement: One small but powerful element of "Journey Into Manhood" is that we offer non-sexual, father-son-style holding that can touch a core unmet need from childhood. It is completely optional, fully supervised, done in a group setting, with clearly taught guidelines to keep it therapeutic.

As a result, we've never seen any inappropriate touch on a "Journey Into Manhood" weekend. Instead, many have discovered that non-sexual brotherly touch and affirmation -- not homosexual relationships -- were what they had really longed for all along. To critics we would add: How can you mock or criticize non-sexual, therapeutic holding but then accept and even celebrate sex between men?



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