

## The Hidden Minority

By Tanner Rose

Imagine being told by someone that you deserved to burn in eternal flames for who you are. Now imagine that you're thirteen years old, and it's your middle school teacher saying it. Picture attending this school, where the students are taught to hate the very essence of what defines you. Finally, what if, as all this is going on, you aren't even allowed to speak up and fight back? That was my reality, and that was how I was forced to uncover my identity.

I discovered that I'm gay at the age of thirteen. It was a gradual realization, and one that I hated more than anything I had hated before. For the first time, I felt absolutely terrified of life. Every dream I once had now seemed to me to be impossible. Gay people can't be politicians, gay people can't play sports, gay people can't do *anything*. The Evangelical Christian schools I attended, since the fourth grade, had taught me about “the gays.” I memorized the verses that sentence homosexuals to death and I learned about how the gay agenda was destroying this country. My teachers drilled into every student's head that homosexuality was not allowed, and was not even to be discussed except in a negative light. In fact, the high school I attended had a policy that anyone who was homosexual, *or even supported gay rights*, would be expelled. The very people that I should have been able to trust for support and help, my teachers, were the ones making me feel worthless.

I felt enraged in class. Every time homosexuality was brought up, it was like adding another coal to the deep, blazing fire of hatred I had for everyone and everything around me. Having to sit and listen as a smug, arrogant teacher lectured about *me* and how evil *I* am, simply for who I am, literally was driving me insane. The focus on homosexuality in Bible class (among other classes) was like the focus on numbers in math. Not a day went by that I didn't hear, either from a student in passing or a teacher in lecture, about the evil gay people. “Indeed, by the time these young men are well into their teens they have already come to see schools as sites of intolerance, oppression, and dehumanization” (Hall 18). Hall may be referring to young men of color, but I felt the same way about my school. I dreaded going to class because every time I did I felt more and more hated and isolated. The same people that would tell me to love and care about all human beings were making me feel sub-human.

More than anger, I felt helpless. I didn't think there was anyone out there who understood what I was going through, and I knew that no one was going to help me. I had no power to change my situation. I simply had to wait.

The way I chose to cope with all this was to hide myself. I hid my identity nearly all my life, and despite my masculine appearance, it wasn't easy. I always had to know the right answer to, “Do you think that girl is hot?” When asked about what girls I liked, or if I had a girlfriend, I lied because I was so scared of someone thinking that I was gay. When my parents would tease me about liking a girl, it didn't hurt because they were teasing me, it hurt because they had no idea who I am, and I felt like I could never tell them. They had no idea the pain I felt from not being “normal.” I had nightmares about people discovering my sexuality. Hiding myself consumed my thoughts all the time. Every word I said or action I took I would always have to

think about before hand, to make sure nobody might think I'm gay for it. Looking back, it seems ridiculous even to me how paranoid I was that people might think I was gay, but it was my reality.

Because nobody in school knew I was gay, when a boy said something like, "Fags are a shit stain on society" nobody knew that I am the "shit stain" he's referring to. And I won't ever forget who it was that said that, nor will I forget how angry I felt that all I could do was stand there in silence. During this time I never imagined I would one day come out. I envisioned living a lie my entire life, staying single and never telling anyone the truth. The consequences of telling someone would have been far too much for me to handle. Expulsion from school, the loss of my friends (who are still anti-gay to this day), and the loss of my family were all guarantees in my mind if I came out. I believed that if anyone thought I was gay I wouldn't be able to get a good job later in life or succeed at anything.

A few things contributed to my perception of how life would be as a gay man. The biggest one was that I didn't know a single gay man or lesbian woman. I had simply never met one before. Of course, I knew gay people existed, but they didn't exist in my world. Second, I was never taught about any gay people from the past. How someone who lives 30 miles from San Francisco could never be educated about Harvey Milk is beyond me. I had no role models to look up to; no one that I could say, "They did it, I can too." Thirdly, I was taught flat out lies about the gay community. Things like: *They're all pedophiles*, or: *Gay people are just interested in sex*. I was of course taught that being gay is a choice, which perplexed me, because I did not want to be gay. "Accepting such a negative spin on your own history necessarily affects your view of your own self-worth, your potential, and your place in this world, not to mention the view others have of you" (Thurston 211). Because I was taught very little about my history, and what I was taught were lies, I had few positive things to associate with my identity. My basic understanding of who gay people are was fundamentally wrong, starting from a very young age.

In fourth grade we had an old man who would come in once a week and read us a chapter from Old Yeller. For some reason, on one of these occasions, he began talking about the use of the word "gay" and how in his time it meant happy. Being the loud and obnoxious fourth grader I was, at recess I ran around yelling "I'm gay!" My teacher put an end to that very quickly. When I asked her why I couldn't say I'm gay, she told me that it meant a very bad thing, and I never would want to be gay. Although this confused me, I left it at that and continued playing at recess.

During junior high and early high school years I had a difficult time socializing and making friends. I believe a big part of my trouble was my homosexuality. Going up to other boys and making new friends was a daunting task at thirteen. If you can imagine how nervous a "typical" boy making friends with girls is at that age, that's how I felt talking to boys. Unfortunately, I wasn't much better at befriending girls, because I just came off as flirtatious to them. These social difficulties compounded the negative image I was made to believe about myself.

As high school progressed and I matured, I slowly became aware that I would eventually need to come out. Some days I wished I could just do it right then and there, but I was too scared to change schools. Telling my parents never crossed my mind. I'm not really sure why, because they had never been anti-gay or even discussed homosexuality before. I just didn't see it as an option. My hope was to get through high school and go off to college somewhere where I could start new.

During my junior year, I came out for the first time. I told my best friend, a girl named Elise. Leading up to it, I actually was considering doing one of two things: asking her out, or telling her I'm gay. Luckily I made the right choice, and thankfully she was a good friend. Although she was shocked, and it took me about an hour of convincing to prove it wasn't a joke, she accepted me. That day was the first time I felt just a little bit better, a little bit more hopeful, about my identity. I felt freed from my secret, if only slightly free. It felt so much better, in fact, that I became determined to tell more people the truth. Within only a few months I had told another friend and the toughest people of all: my parents.

Coming out to my parents was one of the most difficult mental challenges I've ever faced. I wanted so badly to just say it, but every time I tried I couldn't. There's no other way to describe it. My brain knew the words to say, my mouth wanted to say them, but I sat silently instead. When I finally said something it was just as much of a shock to me as it was to anyone else. I said, "Dad, I'm dating somebody." And I'll never forget his first words, "Well, is she pregnant?" He was at least relieved to learn that no, *he* was not pregnant. My dad actually took it far better than I expected, although by no means perfectly. My parents have been very supportive of me since learning the truth, and luckily they don't subscribe to the same religious beliefs as the institutions that educated me. Although we have had fights over issues, and I know my parents will never truly understand how I feel or what I've been through, knowing that they love me unconditionally gives me hope.

During this time of my life, for the first time, I became involved in the LGBT community through a local LGBT youth center. I met other queer youth and adults and educated myself about some of my cultural history. Finally being able to talk to other people who struggle through the same difficulties as me made me feel understood for the first time. I still feel that I don't have nearly enough knowledge about gay history and how my culture has contributed to society, but I hope that over the next few years I will.

Throughout my junior year I realized that I couldn't live in the closet anymore. I simply had to tell everybody. At different times during the year I told my close friends, and to my surprise every single one of them supported me. (This is a different group of friends than my middle school friends who are still anti-gay) At the close of the school term I told everybody, through Facebook, that I'm gay, and I left my oppressive, Christian high school for a public school. I have never once regretted that decision. The new freedom I feel in not needing to hide who I am is exhilarating. Although the vast majority of people I once knew don't accept me for who I am, I don't need them in my life.

I have grown up in a white, middle class family. I went to private school with other white children. From the outside, I don't look like a minority. But I am. I was among the hidden minority; the people who are too afraid or too threatened to be open about their homosexuality. But it is our fear that keeps us down and makes us look smaller than we are. No one knew my struggle with my homosexuality for years. No one could help me. How many other young men and women are still suffering like I did? I dream of a day when our LGBT youth no longer sit hopelessly, silently, invisibly, while nobody knows that they are desperately in need of help. I am a gay, white man, and I can finally say that with pride.

Works Cited

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