

The Battle Over Gay Teens

What happens when you come out as a kid? How gay youths are challenging the right--and the left

By JOHN CLOUD, Oct. 10, 2005, Time Magazine

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In May, David Steward, a former president of TV Guide, and his partner Pierre Friedrichs, a caterer, hosted an uncomfortably crowded cocktail party at their Manhattan apartment. It was a typical gay fund raiser--there were lemony vodka drinks with mint sprigs; there were gift bags with Calvin Klein sunglasses; Friedrichs prepared little blackened-tuna-with-mango-chutney hors d'oeuvres that were served by uniformed waiters. Billionaire philanthropist Edgar Bronfman Sr. was there; David Mixner, a gay activist and longtime friend of Bill Clinton's, was holding court with Jason Moore, director of the musical Avenue Q.

But the odd thing was that the gay (and gay-friendly) élite had gathered to raise money not for one of its established charities--the Human Rights Campaign, say, or the Democratic National Committee--but for an obscure organization that has quietly become one of the fastest-growing gay groups in the nation, the Point Foundation. Launched in 2001, Point gives lavish (often full-ride) scholarships to gay students. It is one of the few national groups conceived explicitly to help gay kids, and it is a leading example of how the gay movement is responding to the emergence this decade of hundreds of thousands of openly gay youths.

Kids are disclosing their homosexuality with unprecedented regularity--and they are doing so much younger. The average gay person now comes out just before or after graduating high school, according to *The New Gay Teenager*, a book Harvard University Press published this summer. The book quotes a Penn State study of 350 young people from 59 gay groups that found that the mean age at which lesbians first have sexual contact with other girls is 16; it's just 14 for gay boys. In 1997 there were approximately 100 gay-straight alliances (GSAs)--clubs for gay and gay-friendly kids--on U.S. high school campuses. Today there are at least 3,000 GSAs--nearly 1 in 10 high schools has one--according to the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN, say "glisten"), which registers and advises GSAs. In the 2004-05 academic year, GSAs were established at U.S. schools at the rate of three per day.

The appearance of so many gay adolescents has, predictably, worried social conservatives, but it has also surprised gay activists, who for years did little to help the few teenagers who were coming out. Both sides sense high stakes. "Same-sex marriage--that's out there. But something going on in a more fierce and insidious way, under the radar, is what's happening in our schools," says Mathew Staver, president of Liberty Counsel, an influential conservative litigation group that earlier this year won a court order blocking a Montgomery County, Md., teachers' guide that disparaged Evangelicals for their views on gays. "They"--gay activists--"know if they make enough inroads into [schools], the same-sex-marriage battle will be moot."

Most gay activists would rather swallow glass than say Mat Staver was right about something, but they know that last year's big UCLA survey of college freshmen found that 57% favor same-sex marriage (only about 36% of all adults do). Even as adult activists bicker in court, young Americans--including many young conservatives--are becoming thoroughly, even nonchalantly, gay-positive. From young ages, straight kids are growing up with more openly bisexual, gay and sexually uncertain classmates. In the 1960s, gay men recalled first desiring other males at an average age of 14; it was 17 for lesbians. By the '90s, the average had dropped to 10 for gays and 12 for lesbians, according to more than a dozen studies reviewed by the author of *The New Gay Teenager*, Ritch Savin-Williams, who chairs Cornell's human-development department.

Children who become aware of their homosexual attractions no longer need endure the baleful combination of loneliness and longing that characterized the childhoods of so many gay adults. Gay kids can now watch fictional and real teens who are out on shows like *Desperate Housewives*, the dating show *Next* on MTV and

Degrassi (a high school drama on the N network whose wild popularity among adolescents is assured by the fact that few adults watch it). Publishers like Arthur A. Levine Books (of Harry Potter fame) and the children's division at Simon & Schuster have released something like a dozen novels about gay adolescents in the past two years. New, achingly earnest books like *Rainbow Road* (Simon & Schuster), in which three gay teens take a road trip, are coming this month. Gay kids can subscribe to the 10-month-old glossy YGA Magazine (YGA stands for "young gay America") and meet thousands of other little gays via [young gay america com](http://younggayamerica.com) or outproud.org Gay boys can chat, vote for the Lord of the Rings character they would most like to date--Legolas is leading--learn how to have safe oral sex and ogle pictures of young men in their underwear on the ruttish chadzboyz.com Not that you have to search so far into the Web: when University of Pittsburgh freshman Aaron Arnold, 18, decided to reveal his homosexuality at 15, he just Googled "coming out," which led to myriad advice pages.

While the phrase "That's so gay" seems to have permanently entered the (straight) teen vernacular, at many schools it is now profoundly uncool to be seen as anti-gay. Straight kids meet and gossip and find hookups on websites like facebook.com where a routine question is whether they like guys or girls or both. When Savin-Williams surveyed 180 young men ages 14 to 25 for an earlier book, "... And Then I Became Gay," he found that nearly all had received positive, sometimes enthusiastic, responses when they first came out. (Many others are received with neutrality, even boredom: University of Washington senior Aaron Schwitters, who was not interviewed by Savin-Williams, says when he came out to his fellow College Republicans at a club meeting last year, "there was five seconds of awkward silence, someone said 'O.K.,' and we moved on.") That doesn't mean young lesbians and gays will never get shoved in the hallway, and multiple studies have shown that gay kids are at higher risk for suicide than their straight peers are. But the preponderance of Savin-Williams' 20 years of research indicates that most gay kids today face an environment that's more uncertain than unwelcoming. In a 2002 study he quotes in the new book, gay adolescents at a Berkeley, Calif., school said just 5% of their classmates had responded negatively to their sexuality.

O.K., that's Berkeley, but the trend is clear: according to Kevin Jennings, who in 1990 founded a gay-teacher group that later morphed into GLSEN, many of the kids who start GSAs identify themselves as straight. Some will later come out, of course, but Jennings believes a majority of GSA members are heterosexuals who find anti-gay rhetoric as offensive as racism. "We're gonna win," says Jennings, speaking expansively of the gay movement, "because of what's happening in high schools right now ... This is the generation that gets it."

Jennings is a spruce, fit, deeply ideological 42-year-old who wants government to spend money to combat anti-gay bias in schools. He often asserts that "4 out of 5" students have been harassed because of their sexual orientation. (He doesn't mention that GLSEN's last big survey, in 2003, found "a significant decline" since 2001 in the use of epithets like fag. Or that about the same proportion of kids--three-quarters--hears fag as hears sexist remarks.) Regardless, the pro-gay government programs he favors seem highly unlikely in this political environment. That's in part because of the growing influence on the right of another gay force: gays who don't want to be gay, who are sometimes called, contentiously, "ex-gays." On talk radio, on the Internet and in churches, social conservatives' canniest strategy for combatting the emergence of gay youth is to highlight the existence of people who battle--and, some claim, overcome-- their homosexual attractions. Because kids often see their sexuality as riverine and murky--multiple studies have found most teens with same-sex attractions have had sex with both boys and girls--conservatives hope their "ex-gay" message will keep some of those kids from embracing a gay identity. And they aren't aiming the message just at teens. On one of its websites, the Christian group Focus on the Family has warned that boys as young as 5 may show signs of "gender confusion" and require "professional help."

It's important to note that nearly all mental-health professionals agree that trying to reject one's homosexual impulses will usually be fruitless and depressing--and can lead to suicide, according to Dr. Jack Drescher of the American Psychiatric Association, who has studied programs that attempt to alter sexuality. Last month

Tennessee officials charged that one of the longest-running evangelical ministries for gays, Love in Action of Memphis, Tenn., was operating unlicensed mental-health facilities. The state said Love in Action must close two residential homes--which include beds for teenagers--or apply for a license. (The ministry's attorney, Nate Kellum, said in an e-mail that the licensure requirement "is intended for facilities that treat mental illness" and not for a "faith-based institution like Love in Action.")

Few young gays actually want to change: six surveys in *The New Gay Teenager* found that an average of just 13% of young people with same-sex attractions would prefer to be straight. Nonetheless, gay kids trying to change can find unprecedented resources. As recently as the late '90s, Exodus International, the premier organization for Christians battling same-sex attractions, had no youth program. Today, according to president Alan Chambers, the group spends a quarter of its \$1 million budget on Exodus Youth; about 80 of Exodus' 125 North American ministries offer help to adolescents. More than 1,000 youths have visited an Exodus-affiliated website called [live hope org](http://livehope.org) to post messages and read articles like "Homosexual Myths" (No. 2: People are born gay). The website, which started as a modest Texas chat board in the late '90s, now gets referrals from scores of churches in 45 countries. "Twenty years ago, most churches wouldn't even let Exodus in the door," says Scott Davis, director of Exodus Youth. "Now there are open doors all across the country."

Davis and I met in July at Exodus' first ever Youth Day, held at a Baptist convention center outside Asheville, N.C. About 100 people ages 15 to 25 were there to worship, sway their arms to Christian rock, listen to advice about how to stop masturbating ("Replace thoughts that aren't worthy of God with thoughts that are," Davis said) and hear the testimony of adults who say they now live heterosexual lives.

An attractive, married 27-year-old, Davis says he was never drawn sexually to men. Rather, he represents a new group of young, straight Christians who are criticizing older Evangelicals for long denouncing gays without offering them what Davis calls "healing." Davis looks nothing like a stereotypical Fundamentalist; he wears spiky hair, Fauvist T shirts, an easy smile. He first noticed the wave of young people coming out when he was pastor of a student church at Virginia Tech. I asked how his group could succeed when homosexuality has been so depathologized among kids. "GLSEN has 3,000 GSAs, but who knows how many student ministries there are, how many Bible clubs in schools?" he answered. "And my hope is they will be the ones who care for these kids."

In a jarring bit of rhetorical mimicry, many Christians who work with gay kids have adopted the same p.c. tributes to "tolerance" and "diversity" employed by groups like GLSEN. One of the savviest new efforts is called Inqueery (slogan: "Think for yourself"). Founded by a shaggy-haired 26-year-old named Chad Thompson, inqueery.com looks at first like a site designed to bolster proudly gay teens. Pink borders surround pictures of stylish kids, and bold text reads, "Addressing LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered] Issues on High School & College Campuses." Thompson, who realized in fourth grade that he was attracted to boys, remembers hurtful anti-gay jokes, and he is convincing when he denounces such bias. "The Christian church has a sordid history--a history of the televangelists from the '80s who would malign homosexuals and say they're all perverts and pedophiles and going to hell--but didn't actually offer you redemption," he says.

Still, Thompson never accepted a gay identity--"Heterosexuality is God's design," he says--and today he is a leading spokesman for young Christians rejecting homosexuality. Thompson says a new kind of bigotry has emerged--among gays. "Those of us who have chosen not to embrace this orientation are often misunderstood and sometimes even ridiculed," he writes in a pamphlet he distributes at campus speaking engagements. Thompson, who has written a book with the near parodic title *Loving Homosexuals as Jesus Would*, hasn't been completely successful in rejecting his gay desires. He admits he still notices handsome men and says, as though he had an internal Geiger counter, "My attractions are probably about 1% of what they used to be." But the idea that liberals and gay activists are attacking Christian strugglers like Thompson has inspired and unified social conservatives. The Rev. Jerry Falwell spoke at this year's Exodus conference for the first time, and others have

begun to agitate for "equal access" for ex-gays in schools.

Earlier this year, a conservative nonprofit called Parents and Friends of Ex-Gays and Gays (PFOX, whose website says it supports "families touched by homosexuality") approached the PTA about exhibiting at the association's conference. The PTA said no: "From what we saw in the application, it seemed more of an agenda than just a resource for parents," says a PTA official. But the association did allow the liberal group Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays to present an anti-bullying workshop. When I spoke with PFOX executive director Regina Griggs about the PTA'S rebuff, she projected a sense of crepitating resentment: "How can you be more diverse than an organization that says if you're happy being a homosexual ... that's your right? But if you have unwanted feelings or are a questioning youth, why can't you make those decisions? I guess diversity stops if you are a former homosexual."

So the Christian right has found its strategy--inclusion, prayer, the promise of change--and the gay movement has found one--GSAs, scholarships, the promise of acceptance. But what of the kids themselves? In July, I met 30 way-out-and-proud LGBT youths at a Michigan retreat arranged by the Point Foundation; these high-achieving Point scholars are getting from \$4,000 to \$30,000 a year to pay for their educations and are considered by some gays to be the movement's future leaders. A few days later at Exodus' Youth Day in North Carolina, I interviewed 13 of the kids fighting their attractions. Few at either conclave seemed interested in the roles their movements had set for them. Instead they were gay or Christian (or both) in startlingly complex ways.

Take Point scholar Maya Marcel-Keyes of Chicago, for instance. The 20-year-old daughter of conservative activist and former presidential candidate Alan Keyes, Marcel-Keyes has a girlfriend but has dated two boys; identifies herself as queer (not lesbian), pro-life and "anarchist"; and attends Mass whenever she can spare the time from her menagerie. (When Marcel-Keyes and I spoke recently, she and her girlfriend had a rabbit, a ferret, a cockatiel, two rats and two salamanders.) For their part, several of the young Exodus Christians seemed more stereotypically gay--"I love that Prada bag!" a 16-year-old boy at the Youth Day squealed several times--than some of the Point scholars who had been out for years. Others had gone to Exodus with no intention of going straight. Corey Clark, 18, belongs to his GSA at Governor Mifflin Senior High in Shillington, Pa., and says he sees nothing wrong with being gay. He attended Youth Day because he wanted to better understand his evangelical church and friends who say gays should change. "Actually," he says, "I've heard so many good things about gay pride"--in the media and at school--"but I hadn't heard directly about the downside."

It's remarkable that a boy like Clark could grow up in a small town and hear more good than bad about gays. But he still waited until he was 17 to come out. You don't have to be a right-wing ideologue to ask whether it's always a good idea for a child to claim a gay identity at 13 or 14. Cornell's Savin-Williams, who is generally sunny about gay kids' prospects, notes that those who come out early tend to have a harder time at school, at home and with their friends than those who don't.

Perhaps it's not surprising that the straight world isn't always ready to accept a gay kid. But the gay world doesn't seem ready either.

On the first day of the Point Foundation's retreat, which was held in a town on Little Traverse Bay called Harbor Springs, Mich., the 38 students who made the trip were given gift bags that contained, among other items:

- A 9 ½-oz. jar of American Spoon Sour Cherry Preserves
- A Fujifilm QuickSnap Flash camera
- A small tin of Trendy Mints from Henri Bendel, New York City
- A DVD of the 2001 film Hedwig and the Angry Inch, in which a teenage boy is masturbated by an adult
- The Harbor Springs Visitors Guide
- The Aug. 16 issue of the gay magazine the Advocate, whose cover featured a shirtless man and blared, SUMMER SEX ISSUE.

There was only one Point scholar at the retreat under 18--Zachery Zyskowski, 17, who is in his second year at UCLA. Zyskowski came out at 13, helped start the GSA at his school and graduated valedictorian; he is far too precocious to be scandalized by a magazine or DVD. (He has watched Hedwig twice. Point executive director Vance Lancaster says the film, a cult musical about the relationship between a drag queen and a young singer, was already a favorite for many scholars. He also says it "reflects reality": "I don't see the negative repercussions to our students, who are very intelligent, thoughtful and mature.")

But when I opened my gift bag, it occurred to me that gay adults are still figuring out how to deal with gay kids. The gay subculture, after all, had been an almost exclusively adult preserve until the relatively recent phenomena of gay adoption and out teens. Point scholar and Emory College junior Bryan Olsen, who turned 21 in August and has been out since he was 15, told me during the retreat, "It probably sounds anti-gay, but I think there are very few age-appropriate gay activities for a 14-, 15-year-old. There's no roller skating, bowling or any of that kind of thing ... It's Internet, gay porn, gay chats."

Olsen believes Point is an exception, and despite the gift bags, he's right. The weekend retreat was packed with anodyne activities such as a boat ride to twee Mackinac Island. Lancaster spends an inordinate amount of energy pairing each scholar with a career-appropriate mentor. The mentors are accomplished and tend to be wealthy--a hedge-fund manager, a university president, movie people--and all undergo background checks.

Point was the brainchild of Bruce Lindstrom, 60, who in 1976 helped Sol Price launch the warehouse retail industry with the first Price Club, in San Diego. Lindstrom had grown up in an evangelical family in Riverside, Calif., and says when his parents and two brothers learned he was gay, they stopped talking to him. His nephew Nathan Lindstrom, 29, says whenever Bruce sent gifts home, the kids were told, "This is from Uncle Bruce, the sodomite."

For years afterward, Lindstrom tried to find a gay organization that was helping kids "not to go through what I went through." He discovered that few gay groups did much for young people. Many gay activists didn't want to fuel the troglodyte notion that they were recruiting boys and girls. GLSEN'S Jennings recalls that when he first started raising money more than a decade ago, "the attitude was either 'Isn't it cute that you're working with kids?' or 'Why are you working with kids? What are you, f_____ crazy?'"

By the late '90s, Lindstrom was talking about the idea of a scholarship program with his boyfriend Carl Strickland (who is 29 years younger) and with his old friend John Pence, a San Francisco gallery owner and former social aide to Lyndon Johnson. One night in 2001 at Lindstrom and Strickland's home--which they call the Point because it sits on a promontory on the Nevada side of Lake Tahoe--the three christened the Point Foundation. Since then, some 5,000 young gays have applied, and 47 Point scholars have been named.

Lindstrom sees the United Negro College Fund and the Rhodes scholarships as his models, and in order to win, Point candidates must prove both academic success and commitment to gay causes. Not surprisingly, many also have biographies resembling Lindstrom's--they come from conservative families that haven't immediately accepted them. Candidates must write an essay on "how you feel you have been marginalized because of your sexual orientation." When scholars were called upon to introduce themselves at the retreat, many offered heartbreaking stories of family repudiation. It was routine to hear sniffing during these presentations, especially from adults.

But when you talk to Point scholars when they aren't performing for donors, you meet kids who are doing a lot better than those complaints suggest. Some remain cut off from their families, but many have repaired relationships with even the most conservative parents. If you read the online Point bio for Matthew Vail, 19, for instance, it says he "sits alone" at family events, "not allowed to have even a gay friend participate in his family life." But in the months since Vail provided the information for that bio, his parents, who live in Gresham, Ore., have

softened considerably, and his boyfriend, Jordaan, was actually staying with Vail's father while Vail was at the retreat. Several other scholars also said their online bios dwelled on old wounds and omitted evidence of resilience.

Even those point scholars with the darkest stories of adversity, like Emory's Bryan Olsen, seem more buoyant than Point lets on. I heard Olsen speak to Point donors twice, once in New York City and again in Michigan. Both times he said that after his Mormon family learned he was gay when he was 15, he was sent to a boot camp for wayward teens in Ensenada, Mexico. Olsen says the facility, Casa by the Sea, required residents to wear shoes without backs so they couldn't run. He says that as punishment for a three-meal hunger strike, he was forced to sit in a stress position--cross-legged, with his nose touching a wall--for two hours. Olsen's small face, which is framed by a pop-star haircut that makes him look as though he's still 15, scrunches with tears when he gets to the next part: "I could only come home when I wrote my parents and promised to be straight and Mormon." There were gasps in the room the first time I heard him tell that story.

But much has changed since Olsen returned from Mexico in 2000. He and his parents haven't completely reconciled, and they aren't paying for his education. Olsen says they told him he had to choose between their financial help and "this lifestyle." But Olsen and his partner, Kyle Ogiela--they met in 2002--are welcomed at the family table every Sunday. Ogiela, 26, even works for Randy Olsen, Bryan's father, as the office manager of the family pest-control firm in Woodstock, Ga. As a Mormon, says Randy, 53, "I don't believe that men should be together. I never will. But I love him as my son. And he and his partner are good boys." Randy says his first reaction to Bryan's teen homosexuality was, "I'm going to find him the best hooker I can." But he says he and his wife sent Bryan to Casa not because he was gay but because he was a "totally unruly kid" who was "just so mean ... To go get that scholarship, I understand he had to be the poor little victim. But for three years, my wife and I were the victims." Seconds later, though, Randy yields again: "It's like God put a pair of new glasses on me ... I thought I could talk him out of [being gay]. But it's not something you can talk someone out of."

(As for Casa, Mexican authorities closed it a year ago. The local health minister charged, among other infractions, that Casa was "not equipped with responsible staff to run a pharmacy." James Wall, spokesman for the Utah-based World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools, which ran Casa, says Bryan Olsen once publicly berated the facility's director during school and that he "is probably exaggerating" his stories of abuse. "I wonder if he's ever been [to Casa]," replies Olsen.)

Olsen deeply appreciates what he calls the Point Foundation's "unconditional support." But one night at the retreat, he also said, "I know they sort of want you to focus on the negative when you're telling your story." At the next fund raiser, Olsen resolves, he will tell the donors that he recently went with his mother, one of his sisters and Kyle to Los Angeles to appear on *The Price Is Right*. And Kyle won a new Buick LeSabre.

The point here is not that gay kids don't have to cope with bigotry and bleakness. A Point scholar who asked not to be identified told me he swallowed 17 Tylenols one summer night just before ninth grade--and when that didn't kill him, 30 more the following night. (He merely felt sick the next day; today he is a thriving college student.) He attempted suicide for various reasons--he says his parents ridiculed his desire to pursue acting instead of football--but being gay didn't help. And while Marcel-Keyes says many of her problems have "nothing to do with my sexuality," she has struggled with self-mutilation--at the retreat, her arms bore scars from shoulder to wrist.

Yet, according to Savin-Williams, most gay kids are fairly ordinary. "Perhaps surprising to researchers who emphasize the suicidality, depression, victimization, prostitution, and substance abuse of gay youth, gay teenagers generally feel good about their same-sex sexuality," he writes. A 56-year-old gay man with a slightly elfish mien, Savin-Williams has interviewed some 350 kids with same-sex attractions, and he concludes that they "are more diverse than they are similar and more resilient than suicidal ... They're adapting quite well, thank

you."

Such statements have puzzled other researchers. "Ritch has never really acknowledged the fact that the average kid who is gay is facing enormous problems," says Dr. Gary Remafedi, director of the Youth and AIDS Projects at the University of Minnesota. "Most of his subjects have been Cornell students, who are among the highest-functioning students of all." Savin-Williams, who has included many low-income and non-Cornell kids in his work, responds that Remafedi and other clinicians have a warped view because they based early research on gay teens from crisis centers. "Are you only listening to hustlers?" he asks.

Savin-Williams opposes programs designed to change sexuality, but he has won admiration from some ex-gay proponents by writing that "sexuality develops gradually over the course of childhood." Gay identities also develop slowly. Even kids who publicly reveal same-sex attractions can be uncomfortable calling themselves gay; instead they say they are "polysexual" or "just attracted to the right person." Those vague labels sound like adolescent peregrinations that will eventually come around to "Yep, I'm gay." But Savin-Williams says many of the tomboys and flouncy guys we assume to be gay are in reality bisexual, incipiently transsexual or just experimenting.

Because he routinely sees young gays on MTV or even at school, a 14-year-old may now feel comfortable telling friends that he likes other boys, but that doesn't mean he is ready to enfold himself in a gay identity. "Today so many kids who are gay, they don't like Cher. They aren't part of the whole subculture," says Michael Glatze, 30, editor in chief of YGA Magazine. "They feel like they belong in their faith, in their families."

"Increasingly, these kids are like straight kids," says Savin-Williams. "Straight kids don't define themselves by sexuality, even though sexuality is a huge part of who they are. Of course they want to have sex, but they don't say, 'It is what I am.'" He believes young gays are moving toward a "postgay" identity. "Just because they're gay, they don't have to march in a parade. Part of it is political. Part is personal, developmental."

The political part is what worries Glatze. "I don't think the gay movement understands the extent to which the next generation just wants to be normal kids. The people who are getting that are the Christian right," he says. Indeed, several of those I met at the Exodus event had come not because they thought it would make them straight or even because they are particularly fervent Christians. Instead, they were there because they find something empty about gay culture--a feeling that Exodus exploits with frequent declamations about gays' supposed promiscuity and intemperance. "I'm just not attracted to the gay lifestyle, toward gay people--I've never felt a kinship with them," says Manuel Lopez, a lapsed Catholic and University of Chicago grad student who went to the Exodus meeting. "There's a certain superficiality in gay attachments--musicals, fashion ... I do think it's a happier life being straight."

Lopez has only an exiguous notion of what real gay life is like, but such misapprehensions are not uncommon among young people with same-sex attractions. Savin-Williams recalls counseling a kid who, after the third session, referred to his "partner." "And I said, 'Oh, you're gay.' And he said, 'No. I only fall in love with guys, but I'm not "gay." It doesn't have anything to do with me.' He saw being gay as leftist, radical." At Exodus' Youth Day, I met several young gays who spoke of the need to "walk out of" homosexuality because, as a 25-year-old from Boston put it, "I'm not happy going to the clubs anymore," as if being gay were mostly about partying. Frank Carrasco, a 20-year-old from Miami, told me his Exodus counseling had helped cure his porn addiction; Carrasco says that during high school, when he was Bible-club president, he routinely looked at gay Internet porn until sunrise. But he has never had a boyfriend or anything approaching a typical gay life. Carrasco says Exodus has helped him develop some heterosexual attractions, but I met very few at the conference who claimed to be completely straight. (At least two of the young men--one 21, the other 18--hooked up that week and still keep in touch.)

A common refrain from Exodus pulpits is that gays don't form lasting, healthy relationships, but those Exodus youths who seemed most successful in defying homosexual feelings were the ones more interested in exploring themselves than in criticizing gays. "I know gay couples who are in their 40s and 50s who have sex parties and use crystal meth, and I know gay couples who have been in committed, monogamous relationships for 15, 20 years," says Michael Wilson, 22, who lives outside Grand Rapids, Mich. "So people need the facts before they say stuff like that." But while he says he still has gay friends--among them, one of his three ex-boyfriends--Wilson believes God doesn't want him to have relationships with men anymore. He often speaks of his "identity in Christ," and to him that trumps his identity as a gay man. A lot of Exodus youths seemed captives of their Christianity, caught in a hermetic loop of lust and gay sex (or masturbation), followed by confession and grim determination. Wilson is different--calmer, more convincing when he says he communes with God. He doesn't deny that he is still sometimes attracted to men, but he doesn't seem to be struggling. "I don't think God would give you a struggle," he says. "I think he brings freedom."

Until recently, growing up gay meant awaiting a lifetime of secrecy--furtive encounters, darkened bar windows, crushing deracination. That has changed with shocking speed. "Dorothy resonates so much with older gay people--the idea of Oz, someplace you can finally be accepted," says Glatze of YGA. "The city of Oz is now everywhere. It's in every high school." That's not quite true, but the emergence of gay kids is already changing the politics of homosexuality. When their kids come out, many conservatives--just ask the Vice President--start to seem uncomfortable with traditionalist, rigid views on gays. But what happens when your child comes out not at 23 but at 13? At least in the short term, it's likely that more gay kids means more backlash.

"It kind of reminds me of the issue of driver's licenses for kids," says the University of Minnesota's Remafedi. "Yeah, it's great they can get around. But there's also a greater chance you can have an accident ... In my own life and generation, we separated ourselves from the straight community. We lived in gay ghettos, and we saw the larger culture as being a culture of repression. Hopefully, some of those walls between cultures have come down. But walking between those worlds takes a lot of skill."

Gay and 21
Bryan Olsen fought hard
for his happiness

Photo Essay

Speaking Out

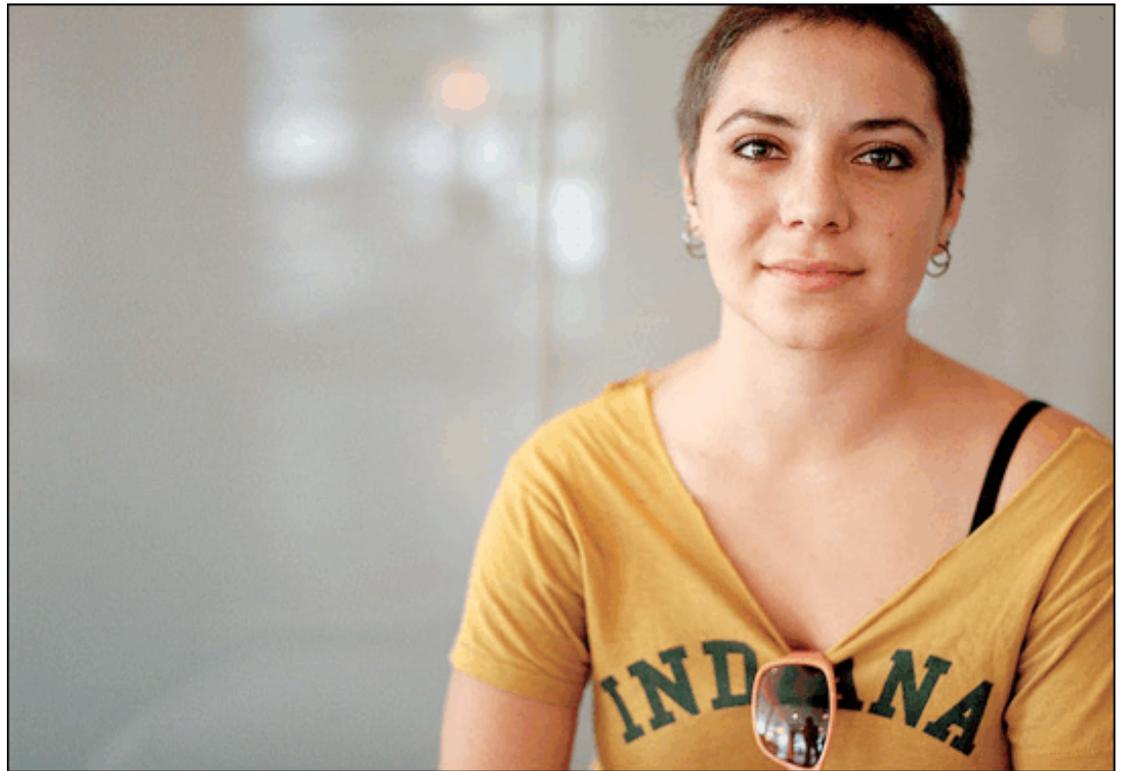
A look at the lives of gay youths in the U.S. [ENTER >>](#)

KATJA HEINEMANN / AURORA FOR TIME

POINT SCHOLARS:
Rohan Barrett and
Lindsay Higgins



POINT SCHOLAR:
Yve Cohen



POINT SCHOLARS:
Matthew Vail (left) and
Aaron Arnold



PROUDLY GAY:
Aaron Arnold, 18, tells his coming-out story at a Michigan retreat for Point Foundation students and trustees, including David Steward, right



TRYING TO CHANGE:
At the Exodus confab in North Carolina, boys pray before the football game scheduled for them. (Girls sat in a discussion circle indoors)



LIGHTNING ROD:
Ritch Savin-Williams, in
his Cornell office in
Ithaca, N.Y., has spent
the past 20 years
studying gay adolescents



HELPING HAND:
A trust-building
exercise at the Point
Foundation retreat for
lesbian, gay, bisexual
and transgendered
students

