

17 controversy

can gay people turn straight?

A hotly debated program claims to “cure” homosexuality. But one graduate says that’s impossible. **BY** cara nissman

Homosexuality is a demon! A man *cannot* lie with another!” Wade Richards remembers his pastor preaching one Sunday in the spring of 1993. Wade, then 14, froze in the pew of his Pentecostal church in Reedsburg, Wisconsin. “When I was 12, I started to get crushes on boys,” he explains. “So when I heard that, I was terrified I was evil.” From that Sunday on, during his daily prayers Wade asked God to take away his feelings for other boys—but it didn’t work. One day after church in January 1994, when Wade was 15, he went up to a few church friends. “I need help,” he begged. “I want to serve God, but I think I’m gay,” Wade said. “Talk to the pastor,” they urged. For the next year, Wade and his pastor met every week to pray for God to change him. Hoping the prayers would work, Wade kept his feelings for guys a secret from his mom.

DRASTIC MEASURES

One day in November 1995, 16-year-old Wade came home to find his mom furiously ripping a poster of RuPaul, a drag queen, off his bedroom wall. “Your principal said he thinks you’re gay!” she screamed. “Are you?” Wade began to cry. “Yes,” he said. “You can’t be gay and live here!” his mom yelled. “But I didn’t *choose* to be!” he replied. Angry and ashamed, Wade started packing a bag—and left his mom’s house.

FORMER MENTORS

From left: Wade with Love In Action’s founder, Frank Worthen, and its executive director, Rev. John J. Smid.

For the next two years, Wade struggled to survive by staying at friends’ houses and homeless shelters. It was too hard to keep up with school, so he quit. “I felt so hopeless and lost—but I refused to call my mom,” he says. “I felt betrayed that she didn’t try to understand me.” Wade got a job at the front desk of a hotel, joined a support group for gay teens, and started experimenting sexually. But because of his religious upbringing, he still felt ashamed. “Then one day in November 1997, I went into a Christian bookstore,” he says. “Suddenly I remembered how peaceful I’d felt in church and how I missed it.” That same day, 18-year-old Wade called his former pastor. “I want to change—but what can I *do*?” he asked. “There’s a Christian program, Love In Action [LIA], that helps people control homosexual feelings,” his pastor replied. Wade applied right away, and his church helped to raise money for his tuition through donations.

As soon as he arrived at LIA, staff members went through Wade’s bags and confiscated everything they thought was a sign of homosexuality, like his designer clothes. Then for the next year

and a half, Wade spent every day in therapy. “I had to tell the other people at LIA every male fantasy I’d had—they wanted to shame me away from being attracted to guys,” he says. “I wanted to be accepted so badly that I just did what they asked.” In October 1999, Wade finally graduated: “I actually thought they’d made me straight,” he says.

MAJOR REALIZATION

In July 2000, Wade went to a club with friends. “A hot guy came up to me, and my heart began to pound,” he says. “I was terrified I might hook up with him.” Right then Wade realized that he’d been lying to himself. He could *never* be straight: He was gay. “It was a huge relief to admit the truth,” he says.

Now 26, Wade is comfortable with being gay. “It’s not my fault if my family and church don’t accept me. I know who I am—and it’s who I have to be.” 17

what do you think?

Can sexual orientation change? Do programs like Love in Action help or hurt? Vote and discuss at seventeen.com/wade.

