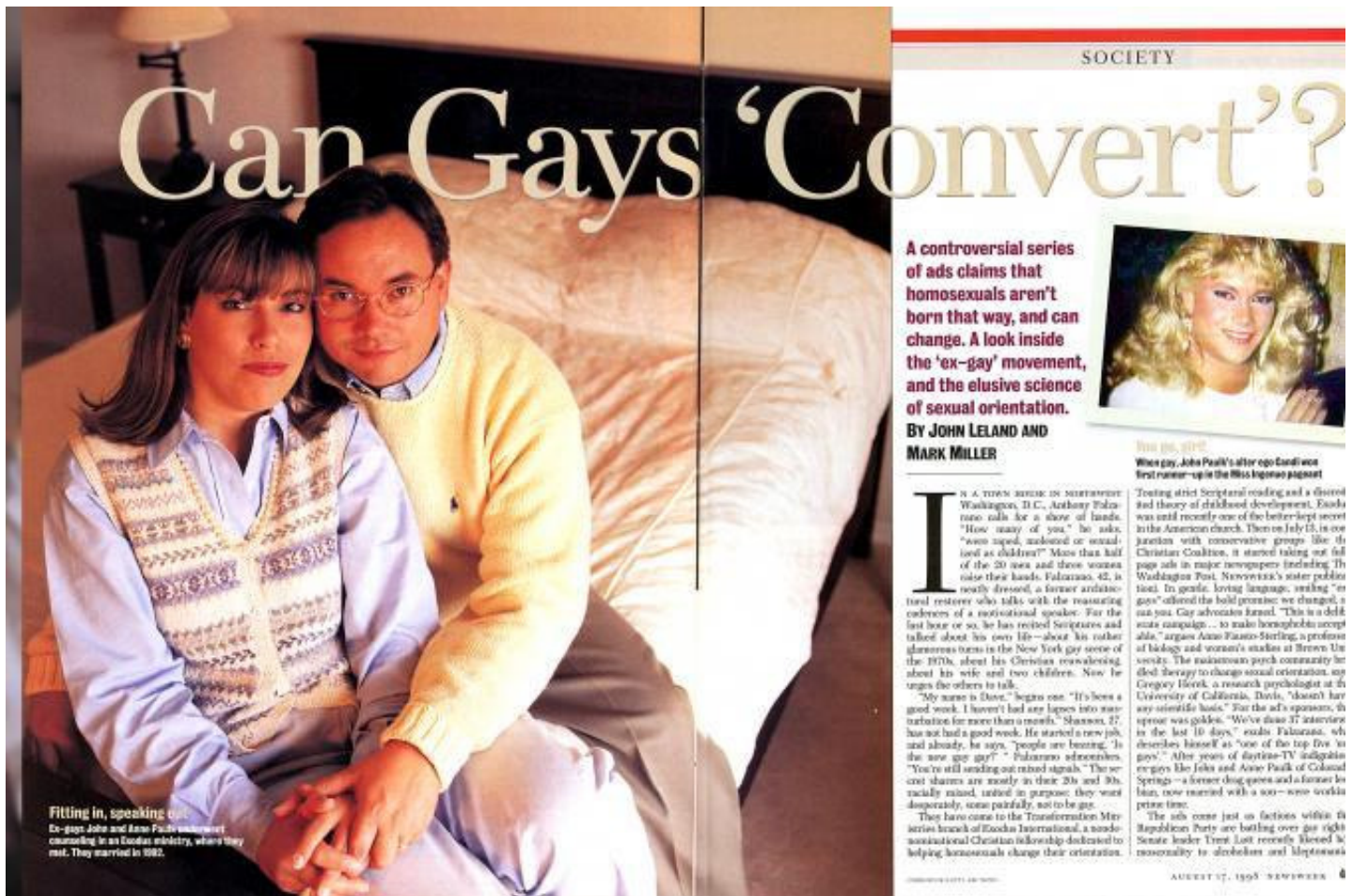


U.S. EX-EX-GAY PRIDE

BY ZOE SCHLANGER AND ELIJAH WOLFSON ON 5/1/14 AT 11:36 AM



From the August 17, 1998 issue of Newsweek. Photo at left by Chris Buck.

NEWSWEEK

U.S. HEALTH RELIGION

On a Tuesday evening nearly 14 years ago, John Paulk walked into a gay bar in Washington, D.C. At another time in his life, Paulk would have fit right in. But in 2000, Paulk's life as an openly gay man was far behind him. He was then one of the most prominent so-called ex-gays in the country, only two years removed from appearing on the cover of *Newsweek*, posing with his smiling wife for an article about gay conversion therapy.

At 37, Paulk had spent the prior 13 years involved with Exodus International, one of the largest and most influential ex-gay organizations in the world. He married another ex-gay, Anne, and together they rose through the ranks, becoming leaders and eventually the faces of a movement that attracted thousands with its message that, if they tried hard enough, gay and lesbian people could become happy heterosexuals. "Change is possible" was their rallying cry. You just needed to surrender yourself to God. Look at us, they said to rooms of thousands. Look how happy we are.

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"We were all over the world. We had been on every show, *People* magazine, *GQ*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, every newspaper. We wrote three books, toured Europe speaking," Paulk tells *Newsweek*. Today, Paulk is openly gay again, divorced and running a catering business in Portland, Oregon. But in the late 1990s and early 2000s, he was trying hard to keep the closet door closed, while preaching a message of ex-gay deliverance from within it. Exodus International was bigger than ever. It served as the umbrella organization for hundreds of ex-gay ministries spread across several countries, some of which performed "reparative" therapy, and all of which preached a message of "healing" the "developmental condition" of gayness through prayer.

Far-right groups including the Family Research Council and the American Family Association pooled \$600,000 to place ads promising the effectiveness of reparative therapy in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. Anne and John Paulk smiled from full-page newspaper spreads.

In front of the crowds and cameras, Paulk was the image of certainty. But backstage, he was faltering. More than that, he knew he was lying.

"It's funny, for those of us that worked in it, behind closed doors, we knew we hadn't really changed," he says. "Our situations had changed—we had gotten married, and some of us had children, so our roles had changed. I was a husband and father; that was my identity. And the homosexuality had been tamped down. But you can only push it down for so long, and it would eke its way out every so often."

When Paulk walked into that gay bar in 2000, someone recognized him and phoned Wayne Besen, a gay rights activist who now runs the nonprofit Truth Wins Out. Besen rushed over and snapped a picture. In the ensuing scandal, Paulk initially claimed he just went in to use the bathroom, and didn't know it was a gay bar. But really, he was aching just to be in a welcoming environment.

"I went to a gay bar—not looking for sex, which is what people thought—but because I was missing my community. I was looking to sit in a place with people I felt comfortable with, and that was other gay people," Paulk says. Though he continued to take speaking engagements, by 2003, he was burned out.

"I would be in hotel rooms, and I would be on my face sobbing and crying on the bed," he says. "I felt like a liar and a hypocrite. Having to go out and give hope to these people. I was in despair knowing that what I was telling them was not entirely honest. I couldn't do it anymore."

was undermined by the reality of its members' behavior. Michael Bussee and Gary Cooper, two of the 66 founders, left the movement in 1979 to be in a committed relationship with one another. (Bussee has spent the decades since actively fighting Exodus's message.) John Evans, one of the founders of Love in Action (LIA), an early ex-gay ministry that helped establish Exodus in 1974, left LIA after a friend committed suicide over his distress at being unable to change his sexual orientation. "They're destroying people's lives," Evans told *The Wall Street Journal* in 1993. "They're living in a fantasy world." (LIA has since changed its name to Restoration Path.)

But there was a time, from the early 1980s all the way through the mid-2000s, when the ex-gay movement appeared to be flourishing. There were the aforementioned newspaper ads, and the big crowds at conferences and speaking events. The Exodus Global Alliance (the organization's international outreach arm) established ministries in 18 countries, and in 2006, President George W. Bush invited Alan Chambers, Exodus's president, and Randy Thomas, Exodus's director of membership, to the White House to lobby for Bush's constitutional ban on gay marriage. The rightward shift of American conservatism and debate over gay marriage brought fringe organizations like Focus on the Family, which was closely connected to Exodus, into the news spotlight again and again.

But all the far-right funding and rapid expansion did little more than prop up a withering institution. A series of scandals chipped away at the ex-gay movement's veneer of success.

First came the photo of Paulk in the gay bar. Then in 2003, Michael Johnston, founder of "National Coming Out of Homosexuality Day," was found to have infected men he'd met online with HIV through unprotected sex. John Smid, who joined LIA in 1986 and eventually became its executive director, left the organization in 2008. Three years later, Smid wrote on his blog that he "never met a man who experienced a change from homosexual to heterosexual," and that reorientation is impossible, because being gay is intrinsic.

Then it crumbled further. In 2012, psychologist Robert Spitzer—one of the leaders of the successful push in the 1970s for the American Psychiatric Association to declassify homosexuality as a disease—retracted a controversial study, published in 2003, often cited by the ex-gay community that had concluded some "highly motivated" individuals could change their sexual orientation. Spitzer wrote an apology to LGBT people who "wasted time and energy" on reparative therapy.

By that time, policy within Exodus began to genuinely shift. "We renounced and forbid reparative therapy," in 2012, Chambers tells *Newsweek*. "And there was an enormous split inside Exodus. Many who were more fundamentalist in approach had already broken off and formed Restored Hope Network." Anne Paulk, John's ex-wife, was one of those who left. She currently serves as executive director of Restored Hope, whose website harkens back to the early days of Exodus, claiming that those with same-sex attraction are "broken" and can "become who they are" under the guidance of Jesus Christ. Despite the fact that Restored Hope's board is composed almost entirely of ex-Exodus members, the website makes no mention of the older organization.

Anne Paulk did not respond to *Newsweek's* questions on the subject, although she did email *Newsweek* a statement in which she declared "We, at Restored Hope, are happy to continue to care for those who are seeking help in aligning their life with classical Christian sexual ethics. Although some choose to return to homosexuality, others who have chosen to leave that same life and thrive. My life would be one example of the latter."

The members of Exodus International who were on board with Chambers's decision to renounce conversion therapy remained until June 2013, when he shut down operations for good. According to Chambers, once he realized there would be no way to separate Exodus from its "sordid history," the only option was to shut the doors. On disbanding, Chambers issued a deeply apologetic press release, stating, "I am sorry for the pain and hurt many of you have experienced. I am sorry that some of you spent years working through the shame and guilt you felt when your attractions didn't change. I am sorry we promoted sexual orientation change efforts and reparative theories about sexual orientation that stigmatized parents."

Today, Chambers says that Exodus's focus on conversion therapy was unplanned and spun out of control. "I never liked the term ex-gay," he says. "I never wanted to be an ex-gay. I just simply wanted Exodus to be an organization that helped people

Other organizations, however, have filled the void left in Exodus's wake. The Restored Hope Network has taken up the mantle of conservative Christian conversion. And in October 2013, a newly formed group, [Voice of the Voiceless](#), hosted its "First Annual [Ex-Gay Awareness Dinner and Reception](#)" that attracted about 60 Christian leaders and ex-gay individuals.

Then there is Jews Offering New Alternatives for Healing (JONAH), formerly Jews Offering New Alternatives to Homosexuality, a [nonprofit](#) created in 1999 by two New Jersey parents who each had a gay son. In November 2012, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) [sued](#) JONAH and one of its counselors on behalf of four men who underwent conversion therapy in the late 2000s. The lawsuit alleged that JONAH violated New Jersey's Consumer Fraud Act and used invalid practices to try to "fix something that isn't broken."

JONAH told *Newsweek* in an email that it "doesn't 'fix' anything." According to co-directors Elaine Berk and Arthur Goldberg, JONAH "refers individuals to independent counselors who employ frequently used techniques to help a person deal with painful issues in their life. These techniques are designed to help people feel better about themselves and to live a life consistent with their religious and personal values. The result is often a diminution of their unwanted same-sex attraction."

The Superior Court of New Jersey rejected JONAH's motion to dismiss in the summer of 2013; Sam Wolfe, SPLC senior staff attorney, expects the case to go to trial in early 2014. Wolfe also notes that since the lawsuit got under way, a number of other individuals have approached SPLC with potential cases of their own.

In the meanwhile, criticism directed towards JONAH has come from within the religious community, as well; when the lawsuit was filed, the Rabbinical Council of America (one of the most influential Orthodox Jewish organizations in the country) immediately distanced itself from JONAH, [reaffirming](#) that, based on the current scientific evidence, they did not endorse gay conversion therapy. (On the other hand, the [Torah Declaration](#), a statement of support, has been signed by many prominent members of the Jewish religious right.)

Lastly, there's the National Association for Research & Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), founded in 1992 by psychologist Joseph Nicolosi. NARTH considers itself the foremost secular proponent of conversion therapy; it counts hundreds of well-credentialed mental health professionals among its ranks and has issued a number of white papers on the subject. It too, however, has suffered in the public eye in recent years: In 2007, NARTH therapist Chris Austin was convicted of sexually assaulting a client, and sentenced to 10 years in prison; in 2010, NARTH board member George Rekers was found to have employed a male prostitute as a companion for a two-week European vacation; and in 2012 the Internal Revenue Service [revoked](#) NARTH's nonprofit status for not properly filing its paperwork.

Paulk left Exodus in 2003. He cautions against "speaking for everybody," but says in his more than two decades of watching people undergo ex-gay therapy, the "large majority" of people he met "did not change one iota." Paulk remained silent for a decade, until he issued a formal apology last year. "I know that countless people were harmed by things I said and did in the past, " Paulk wrote in a statement. "I am truly, truly sorry for the pain I have caused."



John Paulk in 2013.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN PAULK

Today, Paulk strongly believes that no child or teen should be put through any type of “treatment” for their sexual orientation. On the other hand, he says adults should have the right to pursue any therapy they choose. “If I go see a therapist because I am uncomfortable with homosexual feelings or attractions and I do not feel that those are compatible with who I see myself to be, [I] should have the right to determine the course of [my] therapy,” Paulk says. “However, I completely draw the line when it comes to minors.”

The tragedy that Paulk lives with to this day is that organizations like JONAH often specifically target minors, with summer camps and teen programs. “For 25 years I felt guilty and filled with self-loathing, trying to reject this part about myself. I’m culpable—I spread the message that my sexuality had changed, and I used my marriage as proof of that,” Paulk says.

That marriage ended recently. Anne and John now share joint custody of their three teenage sons. At 51, Paulk is living as an openly gay man for the first time since he entered the ex-gay ministry at the age of 24. Paulk said despite the fact that his decision to live a life true to himself was difficult and was accompanied by significant risk (not the least of which was breaking up his family), it was well worth it. During his 10-year silence, Paulk went to culinary school and opened a catering company in Portland. He says he is now “thriving.”

their involvement with ex-gay therapy, and who overcame their past to eventually live life as their LGBT selves. In 2007, the website Beyond Ex-Gay was founded by Peterson Toscano and Christine Bakke, who both were part of Exodus. The site collects first-person narratives from “ex-ex-gays.” Among them is Darlene Bogle, who was a leader in Exodus until 1990, when she fell in love with a woman who attended one of her ex-gay meetings.

“There were a lot of people in leadership positions [in Exodus] who still felt that they were gay but could not admit it,” Bogle tells *Newsweek*. “We learned to lie.”

Like many, Bogle wanted so badly to change her orientation that she convinced herself that if she just kept saying she was ex-gay, and didn’t actually have any sexual relationships with women, then she actually was ex-gay. “But the things you do do not change who you are,” she says. “Even if I was not sexual at all, I would still be a lesbian. I just wish more people had a grasp of that truth.”

Bogle, too, regrets the role she played with Exodus.

“In just trying to help, I did immeasurable harm,” she says. “It’s like when children are molested, and they live with that for their entire lives. They’re still being harmed, even though it happened years ago. I think it’s a lot like what happens when people are involved in ex-gay ministry.”

Bogle and Paulk’s beliefs are held widely by both public health officials and lawmakers. Today, state-level legislators across the country are beginning to push forward rules meant to protect minors from this potential damage. Both California and New Jersey have officially banned gay conversion therapy for minors. In Washington, a [bill](#) has already passed in the House by a 94–4 vote and awaits approval by the state Senate. A similar bill was [introduced](#) earlier this year in both houses of the New York state legislature, where it still awaits a vote. And lawmakers have announced they will be pushing anti-conversion-therapy laws in [Florida](#), [Massachusetts](#), [Minnesota](#), [Ohio](#) and [Pennsylvania](#).

On an individual level, many ex-ex-gays are trying to repair the damage they believe they caused while complicit in ex-gay messaging. Bogle, for her part, has written two books about how being gay and being a Christian are not mutually exclusive.

“I’m trying to go back, to try to bring healing to those who believed my lie,” she says. “It’ll take the rest of my life. I’ll be 70 this year. I just hope God lets me live long enough to let me do it.”

Paulk, meanwhile, hopes his story encourages others to overcome their own fears and uncertainties. “It’s difficult, but worth it at the end of the day because of the peace that comes with it. It’s happy on the other side.”

Correction: An earlier version of this story incorrectly spelled Michael Johnston's name.

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