
The Forsaken: A Rising Number of Homeless Gay Teens Are Being Cast Out by Religious Families

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While life gets better for millions of gays, the number of homeless LGBT teens - many cast out by their religious families - quietly keeps growing

By [Alex Morris](#) | September 3, 2014

One late night at the end of her sophomore year of college, Jackie sat in her parked car and made a phone call that would forever change the course of her life. An attractive sorority girl with almond eyes and delicate dimples, she was the product of a charmed Boise, Idaho, upbringing: a father who worked in finance, a private school education, a pool in the backyard, all the advantages that an upper-middle-class suburban childhood can provide – along with all the expectations attendant to that privilege.



One Town's War on Gay Teens

"There was a standard to meet," Jackie says. "And I had met that standard my whole life. I was a straight-A student, the president of every club, I was in every sport. I remember my first day of college, my parents came with me to register for classes, and they sat down with my adviser and said, 'So, what's the best way to get her into law school?'"

Jackie just followed her parents' lead understanding implicitly that discipline and structure went hand in hand with her family's devout Catholic beliefs. She attended Mass three times a week, volunteered as an altar server and was the fourth generation of her family to attend her Catholic school; her grandfather had helped tile the cathedral. "My junior year of high school, my parents thought it was weird that I'd never had a boyfriend," she says, "so I knew I was supposed to get one. And I did. It was all just a rational thought process. None of it was emotionally involved."

After graduating, Jackie attended nearby University of Idaho, where she rushed a sorority at her parents' prompting. She chose a triple major of which they approved. "I remember walking out of the sorority house to go to Walmart or something, and I stopped at the door and thought to myself, 'Should I tell someone I'm leaving?'" she says. "It was the first time in my life where I could just go somewhere and be my own person."

In fact, it took the freedom of college for Jackie to even realize who her "own person" was. "Growing up, I knew that I felt different, but when you grow up Catholic, you don't really know gay is an option," she says. "I grew up in a household that said 'fag' a lot. We called people 'fags,' or things were 'faggy.'" Her only sex-ed class was taught by a priest, and all she remembers him saying is, "'Don't masturbate and don't be gay.' I didn't know what those words meant, so I just hoped to God that I wasn't doing either of them."

When Jackie got to college, the "typical gay sorority encounters" she found herself having didn't seem to qualify as anything more than youthful exploration; she thought all girls drunkenly made out with their best friends. By her sophomore year, she was dating a

fraternity brother but was also increasingly turned on by a friend she worked with at the campus women's center. "I was just playing it off as 'So maybe I'm just gay for you – I mean, I don't have to tell my boyfriend' kind of thing," she says. "I knew what I wanted, but it was never something I ever envisioned that I could have on a public level." And yet, as her friendship with this woman turned physical and their relationship grew more serious, Jackie saw her future shrinking before her: a heterosexual marriage, children, church and the knowledge that all of it was based on a lie. "I honestly thought my whole life I was just going to be an undercover gay," she says, shaking her head in disbelief.

For better or worse, that plan was never to be. Toward the end of her sophomore year, Jackie got a text message from one of her sorority sisters who said she'd been seen kissing another girl, after which certain sisters started making it clear that they were not comfortable around Jackie. ("You're living in the same house together," she says, "and, of course, to close-minded people, if somebody's gay, that means you're automatically interested in all 80 of them.") Eventually, she went before her chapter's executive board and became the first sorority girl at her college to ever come out, at which point she realized that if she didn't tell her parents, someone else would. "I was convinced somebody was going to blast it on Facebook."

So while Jackie hoped for the best, she knew the call she was making had the potential to not end well. "You can't hate me after I say this," she pleaded when, alarmed to be receiving a call in the middle of the night, her mom picked up the phone.

"Oh, my God, you're pregnant" was her mom's first response, before running through a litany of parental fears. "Are you in jail? Did you get expelled? Are you in trouble? What happened? What did you do?" Suddenly her mom's silence matched Jackie's own. "Oh, my God," she murmured in disbelief. "Are you gay?"

"Yeah," Jackie forced herself to say.

After what felt like an eternity, her mom finally responded. "I don't know what we could have done for God to have given us a fag as a child," she said before hanging up.

As soon as the line went dead, Jackie began sobbing. Still, she convinced herself that her parents would come around and accept her, despite what they perceived to be her flaw. As planned, she drove to Canada to celebrate her birthday with friends. When her debit card didn't work on the second day of the trip, she figured it was because she was in another country. Once back in the States, however, she got a call from her older brother. "He said, 'Mom and Dad don't want to talk to you, but I'm supposed to tell you what's going to happen,'" Jackie recalls. "And he's like, 'All your cards are going to be shut off, and Mom and Dad want you to take the car and drop it off at this specific location. Your phone's going to last for this much longer. They don't want you coming to the house, and you're not to contact them. You're not going to get any money from them. Nothing. And if you don't return the car, they're going to report it stolen.' And I'm just bawling. I hung up on him because I couldn't handle it." Her brother was so firm, so matter-of-fact, it was as if they already weren't family.

From that moment, Jackie knew that she was entirely on her own, that she had no home, no money and no family who would help her – and that this was the terrible price she'd pay for being a lesbian.

Jackie's story may be distinctive in its particulars, but across America, it is hardly unique. Research done by San Francisco State University's Family Acceptance Project, which studies and works to prevent health and mentalhealth risks facing LGBT youth, empirically confirms what common sense would imply to be true: Highly religious parents are significantly more likely than their less-religious counterparts to reject their children for being gay – a finding that social-service workers believe goes a long way toward explaining why LGBT people make up roughly five percent of the youth population overall, but an estimated 40 percent of the homeless-youth population. The Center for American Progress has reported that there are between 320,000 and 400,000 homeless LGBT youths in the United States. Meanwhile, as societal advancements have made being gay less stigmatized and gay people more visible – and as the Internet now allows kids to reach beyond their circumscribed social groups for acceptance and support – the average coming-out age has dropped from post-college age in the 1990s to around 16 today, which means that more and more kids are coming out while they're still economically reliant on their families. The resulting flood of kids who end up on the street, kicked out by parents whose religious beliefs often make them feel compelled to cast out their own offspring (one study estimates that up to 40 percent of LGBT homeless youth leave home due to family rejection), has been called a "hidden epidemic." Tragically, every step forward for the gay-rights movement creates a false hope of acceptance for certain youth, and therefore a swelling of the homeless-youth population.

"The summer that marriage equality passed in New York, we saw the number of homeless kids looking for shelter go up 40 percent," says Carl Siciliano, founder of the Ali Forney Center, the nation's largest organization dedicated to homeless LGBT youth. A former Benedictine monk-in-training, who once went by the nickname Baby Jesus, Siciliano had spent years living in monasteries and serving in shelters run by the Catholic Worker Movement before his own sexuality inextricably came between him and his institutional faith. "I ended up just feeling like the Catholic Church was wack," he says. "Cardinal O'Connor [the archbishop of New York at the time who once said if he was forced to hire homosexuals, he would shut down all of the Catholic schools and orphanages in the diocese] was like the arch-homophobe of America." Siciliano was working at a housing program for the homeless in the Nineties when he noticed that his clientele was getting younger and younger. Until then, he says, "you almost never saw kids. It was Vietnam vets, alcoholics and deinstitutionalized mentally ill people." But not only were more kids showing up, they were also disappearing. "Every couple of months one of our kids would get killed," Siciliano says. "And it would always be a gay kid." In 2002, he founded the Ali Forney Center, naming it after a homeless 22-year-old who'd been shot in the head on the street in Harlem, not far from where the organization's drop-in center currently resides. Siciliano had been close with Forney and felt that had he had a safe place to go, he might be alive today.

Since founding the center, Siciliano, 49, has become one of the nation's most outspoken homeless advocates. "I feel like the LGBT movement has been asleep at the wheel when it comes to this," he says, running his hands through his closely cropped hair and sighing. "We've been so focused on laws – changing the laws around marriage equality, changing 'don't ask, don't tell,' getting adoption rights – that we haven't been fighting for economic

resources. How many tax dollars do gay people contribute? What percentage of tax dollars comes back to our gay kids? We haven't matured enough as a movement yet that we're looking at the economics of things."

Siciliano also understands that the kids he works with don't sync up with to the message everyone wants to hear: It gets better. "There is a psychological reality that when you're an oppressed group whose very existence is under attack, you need to create this narrative about how great it is to be what you are," he says. "It's like, 'Leave the repression and the fear behind and be embraced by this accepting community, and suddenly everyone is beautiful and has good bodies and great sex and beautiful furniture, and rah-rah-rah.' And, from day one of the Stonewall Riots, homeless kids were not what people wanted to see. No one wanted to see young people coming out and being cast into destitution. It didn't fit the narrative."

Jackie knew well what her parents thought of homosexuality, but she still held out hope that maybe over time her family would come around. With the last of her cash, she bought a bus ticket back to campus, where within a few weeks she defaulted on her rent. She started couch surfing and persuaded the women's center to let her work through the summer for \$6 an hour, 10 hours a week. "I mean, it was crap money, but it was something," she says. "I didn't tell anybody the situation I was in. I didn't tell anybody I was hungry every day. I didn't tell them I didn't have a place to stay, because I thought this was my punishment for being gay and I deserved it." She'd ask friends to crash overnight, lying about being too drunk to go home. If that fell through, she'd spend nights in study rooms on campus. She found herself dating women simply to have a bed, which she admits was neither "healthy nor permanent."

In the upheaval that had suddenly become her daily existence, Jackie felt that she had to cling to something constant; she chose her education. The day after returning to campus, she went to the financial aid office to ask for the help she'd never before had to seek, appealing to the university to gain status as an independent student. Though she did eventually receive tuition assistance, Jackie says, "You're not meant to be homeless and a student. I learned really fast how to pretend to not be poor. I learned that if I had a couple of nice things to wear, nobody would notice that you wear them all the time. Or if you are a sociable person, people don't notice that you're never actually buying drinks. You just sort of figure it out."

She was soon taking any job she could get: on campus, in town, even picking up the odd construction shift. "I would do anything I could for money," she says. She finally pieced together enough funds to get a room in an apartment, but she couldn't afford furniture. To hide her penury, she never let anyone in her room. Even being around other gay people was sometimes difficult, a reminder that though "they had committed the same 'sin,' their parents loved them," she says. "They got to go home for the holidays. I had these moments when I would say, 'I did everything right. I excelled in all the right ways. So why me?' That hurt really bad. I mean, how do you explain to people that your parents chose not to parent you anymore?"

At times, it felt like more than Jackie could bear, and in these moments of doubt and despair she wrote her mother and father countless letters and e-mails begging them to be her parents again. "I wanted to take it all back so badly," she says. "I was just like, 'I'm sorry,

I didn't mean any of it." They eventually responded: If she went to a conversion therapist and tried to be straight, they would at least help her financially. At first, she agreed. "But I couldn't do it," she says now, four years later, in a city hundreds of miles away from where she imagines her parents still live. "I wanted to be their kid, but I couldn't change. Everyone I'd ever known my whole life cut ties with me. But this was who I am."

Growing up in a small Midwestern town, the son of a divorced Latina who worked three jobs, James would have felt like an outsider even if it weren't for his sexuality. His hometown was the kind of all-American, cornfed place where "on every street corner you'd find a church" and where "the football players, if they knew you were gay, would call you a fag and tell you to suck their dick, or try to get you to bend over." Already sidelined for being a minority, James, 20, says he "was terrified of being branded the gay kid." In fact, he was so afraid that he suppressed an effervescent personality and kept to himself. When an openly gay classmate gave him a love letter, James was too scared to act on the impulses he'd felt for as long as he could remember. "So I just flipped out on him. I wasn't ready for that."

The same kind of fear kept James silent at home, where his mom cycled through religions: first Catholic, then Pentecostal ("die-hard Pentecostal"), then Jehovah's Witness, and then back to Catholic once she met James' stepfather. Though James never told his mom he liked other boys, her views on the matter were abundantly clear – "It was disgusting, sick, adding to the end of the world" – and she must have suspected. "At one point, and I was right there," he says, "my mom actually told this lady that she loved all of her children besides me."

Nevertheless, he worked up the courage to secretly start dating someone he'd met while waiting tables, and when he accidentally left his phone at home one day, his mom searched through it and found a picture of them kissing. "That was the day it really got serious," James says of the fallout with his family. "When I came home, she accused me of being a whore and told me I'd die of STDs. She made my brother move out of the room that we shared. I guess she thought it was a disease or something, that I would give him the gay. Like, I'd touch him and he'd automatically be gay."

Shortly after James graduated from high school, his mom told him that her home was not open to "people like you." He grabbed a bag and followed her orders. "I was like, 'I don't know how I'm going to do this, I don't know where I'm going,'" he says. "But at some point, it has to get better." He decided to get as far from home as he could. "I hitchhiked – 18-wheelers, anybody who would give me a ride. I knew it was dangerous." He was in Florida before he felt like he'd gone far enough to stay put, though the only place he could find to sleep was an abandoned lot. "It used to be an old bus station," he says, shrugging. He lasted three penniless weeks alone there, collecting rainwater to drink and going hungry. "For the first week, you'll be like, 'I'm dying of hunger,' but after a while you don't feel it anymore." He finally got in touch with a friend who lived in Atlanta, and ended up staying in the friend's car until they heard about a shelter called Lost-n-Found Youth, which had been started specifically for the large influx of homeless LGBT kids who travel from the surrounding red states to one of the South's most liberal cities.

As James (who has asked me to change his name so he would not be identifiable to his family) is telling me this, he's covered in dust and plaster particles from renovation work on

the rambling old Victorian that Lost-n-Found has been able to lease for \$1 a year. One day, the house will be able to give shelter to 18 homeless youths – a day that cannot come nearly soon enough for Rick Westbrook, a kindly 51-year-old with a serious Southern drawl. Along with two friends, Westbrook started Lost-n-Found in a small but cozy home he rented using donated funds, after learning that LGBT youth were frequently being turned away at local shelters.

Westbrook, known to his charges as "Mama Rick," says this has been due to discrimination: In one survey, approximately one in five LGBT youth were unable to secure short-term shelter, and 16 percent could not get assistance with longer-term housing – figures that were almost double those of their non-LGBT peers. However, it's clear that funding is also a problem. The U.S. government spends more than \$5 billion annually on homeless-assistance programs, yet federal laws allocate less than five percent to homeless children and youth specifically (though some money also makes its way to them through more generalized programs under agencies like HUD and the Department of Labor). Most of the dedicated funds are allocated through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), which expired last September. "This is the first time it has not been reauthorized on time since 1988," says Gregory Lewis, executive director of Cyndi Lauper's True Colors Fund, who is working with Congress to ensure that RHYA will include a nondiscrimination clause. Currently, Lewis tells me, "there are no legal federal protections in place to bar discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity in RHYA programs." At one residential placement facility in Michigan, LGBT teens were made to wear orange jumpsuits to "warn" other residents about their sexuality.

Since 2002, when President George W. Bush issued an executive order that permitted faith-based organizations to receive federal support for social services, an increased amount of federal funding has gone to churches and religion-affiliated organizations where LGBT youth may not feel welcome. The biggest provider for homeless youth in the country is Covenant House, an organization based in New York and a shelter where LGBT teens have historically faced harassment. "The gay kids would routinely get bashed there," Siciliano tells me. "In the Nineties, one of the first kids I had go there came back and said he would never go back. When I asked why, he said they put him in a dorm with 14 kids, and when they went to bed, they gathered around and urinated on him to show how much they hated having a gay kid there."

Yet to have even landed a bed at Covenant would have taken some luck. In New York, a city with nearly 4,000 homeless youth, there are only around 350 spots in youth shelters, and less than a third of those spots are designated for LGBT kids, despite their disproportionate share of the homeless-youth population. (And considering that many homeless youth may not openly identify themselves as LGBT when seeking services, many providers believe that the estimate of 40 percent may be far too low.) Across the country, there are only 4,000 youth-shelter beds overall, while an estimate derived from the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children put the number of homeless minors at 1.7 million. "We've actually thought about creating a handbook: This is what to look for in a decent, abandoned building to stay in," says Westbrook ruefully. "If we don't have the space for them, as an activist, it's the next logical step: Give them information."

While reserving beds for LGBT youth might at first seem like segregation, providers have often found that it can be difficult to ensure a safe space otherwise – and that creating a safe

space can have a very discernible effect. James' roommate Hannah (unlike most shelters, Lost-n-Found does not separate rooms by sex, making it much easier for trans kids to assimilate) was in and out of shelters all over the Atlanta area for more than three years after she was kicked out by a mother who had adopted her at age two because she'd always wanted a girl, and then rejected her when Hannah proved not girly enough. "She read me Scripture about how people who have sexual sin would not enter the gates of heaven," Hannah, a zaftig AfricanAmerican, says, frowning. When that didn't seem to have an effect, "she takes a knife and puts it right here" – Hannah points to her neck – "and says she will kill me, that she hates me and regrets adopting me." Hannah was 20 and just back from a Job Corps training program when she found a policeman at her bedroom door telling her she had to leave, that her mom no longer wanted Hannah under her roof. Her stepfather gave her \$20 on the way out. While driving her to a bus stop, the cop told her how sorry he was.

Over the next three years, Hannah cycled through shelter after shelter. The weeks, and sometimes months, when she couldn't find a bed, she slept on the street, often outside the Day Shelter for Women, where she could at least get warm meals and a shower, even if she also found maggots in her hair. Living like that, it was impossible to imagine going to a job interview, especially after she lost her birth certificate and high school diploma when a worker at a shelter accidentally cleaned out her locker. She sold pot to make money and considered prostitution, a way many homeless women she knew got by. "I was very tempted," she tells me. "Like, I had a guy say, 'I'll give you \$100 if you do what I tell you to do.'" Hannah knew \$100 was enough money to put herself up in a hotel for a couple of nights, but she says, "I could never see myself doing it."

It wasn't until she finally got off the waitlist at Lost-n-Found that Hannah began to see there might be a future for herself as a nonstraight woman – a revelation that Westbrook assures me is not uncommon. "Just in the two years we've been up and running," he says, "there've been several kids we've run into who have been through every single system in town, but for some reason, they did not thrive. Other caseworkers had told us, 'Good luck with him or her. We did all we could.' These kids are now either in college or in an apartment of their own. The minute you bring them into a program like ours, where they're with people like themselves, they don't feel like they're outnumbered, they don't feel oppressed. They blossom."

Hannah still sometimes feels like she's "burning in hell." She still wonders if "my life's always been horrible because I like girls." But since she started staying at Lost-n-Found, things have definitely shifted. She no longer sleeps with a knife under her pillow or worries about being kicked out of a shelter for her sexuality. She has a steady job with UPS, LGBT friends who accept her and a small safety net of savings to get her own apartment one day soon. "I'm not scared no more," she says. "I don't have to worry about people beating on me. It has been 100 percent better."

For LGBT kids who remain homeless, the stakes are clearly life and death. They are seven times more likely than their straight counterparts to be the victims of a crime, often a violent one. Studies have shown they are more than three times more likely to engage in survival sex – for which shelter is the payment more often than cash. They are more likely to lack access to medical care, more likely to attempt suicide, more likely to use hard drugs and more likely to be arrested for survival crimes. According to the Equity Project, leaving home

because of family rejection is the single greatest predictor of involvement with the juvenile-justice system for LGBT youth. And for so many of these outcomes, the clock starts ticking the moment a kid hits the streets. "We know we have 24 to 48 hours to get to them before they do anything illegal – whether it's selling drugs, stealing or prostitution," says Westbrook. "It's a survival thing. In America, we lose six queer kids a day to the street. That's every four hours a queer kid dies, whether it be from freezing to death or getting the shit beat out of them or a drug overdose. This is our next real plague."

In fact, the ability to cope and handle homeless life may be significantly diminished in children who have grown up in very sheltered, religious environments. "It sounds so paradoxical, but the kid who's been abused and neglected from childhood, in this very perverse way, they're ready for the trauma that's to come on the streets," says Jim Theofelis, executive director of the Mockingbird Society, an advocacy organization for young people impacted by homelessness and the foster-care system, which does not always effectively screen for family acceptance before placing an LGBT youth. "But queer youth who grew up in a family where they were taken care of, and there was ice cream in the freezer at night, they face an extra challenge of really not being prepared for the culture of the streets or the foster-care system."

That so many once-coddled youth choose this lifestyle over remaining at home is a testament to how horrifying familial rejection can be – and a phenomenon youth advocates refer to as being not "kicked out" but rather "edged out." "The greatest gift my family ever gave me is driving me to the train station," says Luke, 20, a soft-spoken son of a Pentecostal preacher who grew up in a backwoods part of Tennessee so remote that the closest town had less than 2,000 people and was 20 miles away. His only neighbors were a great-aunt and great-uncle, and because he was home-schooled until the second grade, after which his education ceased altogether ("My family didn't approve of the things they taught at school, like science and sex ed"), he would go whole months at a time without seeing anyone outside of his family and the members of his church. He attended services at least three times a week, participating in faith healings and speaking in tongues. His dad performed exorcisms at home; once Luke realized that the feelings he had for men meant that he was gay, he was terrified that an exorcism would be performed on him. "It's their belief that they can see auras or tell when people are lying, so I was always scared that everyone would be able to figure out my sexuality that way," Luke says. "I prayed all the time that they wouldn't. It was all just demon possession. That's how they thought all gay people were, just possessed." When the issue of gay rights would come up on the radio, Luke's father would say in disgust, "They should gather all the gay people together and just kill them." When Luke finally worked up the nerve to come out to his mother, she told him, "If you want to live, don't tell your dad."

But by then, Luke wasn't sure he did want to live. He felt so depressed that he rarely left his room. He started having panic attacks. When a friend he'd made online told him that he couldn't possibly stay in his situation any longer, he knew it was true. But he also knew that he didn't have any skills, any education, any money or anywhere else to go. That's when his friend sent him a \$300 train ticket to Portland, Oregon, and told him about a youth shelter called Outside In. Luke told his family he was leaving, and though they warned him about how scary it was in the outside world, they didn't stop him.

For Luke, the outside world has in fact been scary. During his three-day train ride to the West Coast, he barely left his seat except to change trains in Chicago, where Union Station was filled with more people than he'd ever seen in his life. Once he got to Portland and secured a shelter bed, he was so shy that he couldn't speak above a whisper. "There were a lot of heroin users, a lot of meth and weed," he says. "I was like, 'I don't know if I can do this, because I'm used to being around church people.'" Nevertheless, the time away from his family has helped him begin to accept the reality of his sexuality. "I'm free now, and I can be how I want, and that's not wrong at all. It's a struggle at times, but I'm getting there." On the day we spoke, Luke had been homeless for almost a year. "It's definitely been the best year of my life," he says.

On Palm Sunday this past April, Carl Siciliano wrote an open letter to Pope Francis that was published as a full-page ad in *The New York Times*. "Your Holiness," it began, "I write to you as a Roman Catholic, a former Benedictine monk and as a gay man who has spent over 30 years serving the homeless." It then went on to explain how the papal stance on homosexuality tears families apart and to beg the head of the church – which disregards biblical passages on atrocities like slavery and genocide – to see that the time has come to reconsider a teaching that yields "such a bitter harvest."

Of course, the bitter harvest begins long before a child ends up on the streets. When Ben, the youngest son of a Baptist minister from New Hampshire, asked his mother at age nine what the word "gay" meant, he didn't realize that the answer she gave would describe his own feelings – or that those feelings would, from that moment on, impact his emotional development. "She explained what it was and told me that it was an abomination," Ben tells me in the sunny group-therapy room at the Ali Forney Center, which he ran away to at age 17. "It was like telling a nine-year-old that they are broken. I remember being on the kitchen floor just crying, praying to God for him to make me normal. That's how I looked at it: 'If it's this bad for me to be this way, why did God make me? I wish I were dead.'" When Ben finally did come out to his parents at age 16, they sent him away to a Christian school across the country and began to explore reparative-therapy options, all of which reinforced the idea that he was terribly flawed, so much so that "the people closest to me thought I needed to be changed, fixed."

The problem is, running away, as Ben did, may deliver youth from their parents' judgment, but not from that of God – whom more than half of the youth I spoke with said they still believed in – and once on the street, the psychological trauma that's inherent in this deeply internalized shame often plays out to their detriment. And yet, as hard as it might be to imagine conservative faiths backing down from their demonization of homosexuality, it can be equally hard to get activists to address the issue. "LGBT advocacy groups don't want to talk about religion," says Mitchell Gold, founder of Faith in America. "One, they don't want to come across as anti-religion. And two, they just aren't familiar with it. But the number-one hurdle to LGBT equality is religious-based bigotry. The face of the gay-rights movement shouldn't be what I call '40-year-old well-moisturized couples.' The face of the gay-rights movement should be a 15-year-old kid that's been thrown out of his house and taught that he's a sinner."

Of course, even when it's a large factor, religion often isn't the only reason a child leaves home. Many stories include poverty, addiction and abuse; the intricate workings of a family's dynamic can be impossible for an outsider to understand or parse. But it becomes

so natural to vilify parents who've abdicated their duties or alienated their kids that it is often forgotten how very hard it can be to change one's worldview in the face of deeply ingrained religious beliefs. "It's easy to see kids as victims and parents as perpetrators," says Caitlin Ryan of the Family Acceptance Project. "But most parents would not want to make a Sophie's choice between their faith and their child. These are parents who have been given misinformation for years."

Nevertheless, more than 40 percent of the agencies responding to the LGBT Homeless Youth Provider Survey do not offer services that address family conflict. When Child Services got involved with Ben's case, as the law requires of homeless minors, they initially wanted to send him home. And his parents wanted him back: Under their own roof, they would have been able to control his contact with the secular influences they felt were affecting his sexuality. Ben refused to return to that environment. He promised his social worker that he would only run away again – and that the next time, he'd know enough to stay under the radar.

In December 2013, Jackie finally graduated from college – not that she attended the ceremonies. "The only reason you walk during graduation is so people can watch you," she says. "But I had nobody to invite – and a cap and gown cost money – so I just took a shift at work instead."

As she's saying all this, Jackie, now 24, is slowly sipping a Pabst Blue Ribbon in the sort of pleasant dive you'd expect to find in Portland, the city she now calls home (the signs on the bathroom doors read BOTH and EITHER). Last week, the marriage-equality law went into effect in Oregon, and so it's a celebratory time, even for those like Jackie who know what disappointments faith in one's future can bring. Not long ago, she was in Ikea with her girlfriend, when, for the first time in years, she felt herself begin to come apart. "I never shed a tear after coming out, ever, but I always knew the mourning was going to come, and it did," she says. "When you stop stressing about food and having a roof over your head, you stress about normal things like wanting to be wanted, or wanting to be loved, or 'Damn, I wish I had a photo of myself from when I was a kid.'"

Jackie's girlfriend has helped her cope with the transition. Now that Jackie has a job training sexualassault advocates, she can enjoy the first adult relationship she's ever had, in which a stocked fridge and warm bed weren't wrapped up in it, marring the emotional aspects. And while she says it's strange, being with someone simply to be with them, she admits "there's a healing process in entering a consensual, healthy relationship that's based on love rather than need." It's not quite the same as having a family, but it's not like being alone either.

The evening's golden sunlight streams in through the bar's front window, washing the room in sepia tones. Jackie leans back in her chair. Wearing Ray-Bans, hair rakishly swooped to the side, she looks like any other educated, socially conscious Portland hipster. But for Jackie, poverty and abandonment are brands she'll carry for life. "I'll never look at a bed in the same way; I'll never look at food in the same way," she says. "Sometimes, I'll sit at a table with people I interact with on a daily basis and think, 'None of these people have an inkling of anything I've been through, and they never will.'"

Jackie doubts she'll ever speak to her family again, though it's still hard to think of holidays spent without them, of childhood stories that will remain untold, of the jarring lack of

continuity between her existence then and now. "I spent the past four years paying for that one sentence I uttered," she says quietly. "People ask me all the time if I hate my parents for everything they've put me through, but I really don't. If anything, I just feel sad for them because I'm sure it hurts so bad to have chosen their religious values over their child. I mean, in the grand scheme of things, they suffered through it just as much as I did, just in different ways." She sighs and looks out the window to where the shadows will soon lengthen into night. "I think, in the long run, no one won."

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