

PLACE A CLASSIFIED AD | WHERE TO FIND THE BLADE

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2005

no plans for the weekend?



- HOME
- CLASSIFIEDS

- THE LATEST
- BLADEWIRE
- BLADEBLOG

NEWS

- LOCAL NEWS
- NATIONAL NEWS
- WORLD NEWS
- HEALTH NEWS
- RELIGION NEWS
- POLICE BEAT
- LEGAL NEWS

- VIEWPOINT
- LOCAL LIFE
- ENTERTAINMENT
- ECLIPSE
- NIGHTLIFE

- BITCH SESSION
- CALENDARS
- CARTOONS

ARE

EMAIL UPDATES

New to email updates? Then [click here](#) to find out more.

email address

 subscribe
 unsubscribe

I have read and agree to our terms and conditions.

[Sign Up](#)

ADVERTISING

- GENERAL INFO
- E-EDITION
- MARKETING

ABOUT US

- ABOUT THE BLADE
- MASTHEAD
- EMPLOYMENT

NATIONAL NEWS

Tenn. probes 'ex-gay' camp

Teen's blog leads to outcry, charges of child abuse

By [EARTHA MELZER](#)

Friday, June 24, 2005

The state of Tennessee has begun an investigation in response to allegations of child abuse at Love in Action, a Memphis facility that advertises homosexual conversion therapy for adolescents, according to a department of health source.

K. Daniele Edwards, a spokesperson for Child Services at the Tennessee Department of Health, confirmed an investigation is underway but declined to comment on the details. She noted that she presumes the Love in Action program would require licensing by the state.

Love in Action is not licensed by the Tennessee Departments of Health, Mental Health, Human Services, Child Services or Education, according to Rachel Lassiter of Gov. Phil Bredesen's communications office.

"Refuge," Love in Action's program for adolescents, became the focus of public concern earlier this month after a Bartlett, Tenn., teen, "Zach," [blogged](#) that his parents had responded to his coming out as gay by sending him to a religious institution to be converted to straight.

"Emotional abuse is difficult to prove in the state of Tennessee," said Pamela Dickey, director of the advocacy center for Childhelp USA in Knoxville. "You have to document that the child is undergoing depression or suicidal ideation, that he can't sleep, or can't eat."

Officials from Love in Action appealed for "tolerance" of their program at a June 16 news conference.

"It is our spiritual conviction that sexual behavior outside of heterosexual marriage is considered wrong in the sight of God," said John Smid, the program's director, who describes himself as "ex-gay," according to a partial transcript of the news conference.

"This program is operated on the will of the guardian or parent. We will work with the minor children as long as they are not overtly distracting to their own program or the program of others," Smid added. "If it is shown that the client is overtly treatment resistant, we will work with the parent towards alternative options for their care and overall relational health."

Blogger EJ Friedman said that he had been corresponding with Zach via e-mail since March and became alarmed when he saw that Zach had begun to write that his world was coming to an end and that his parents were isolating him.



Gay rights advocates demonstrate outside the Love In Action compound in Memphis after a teenager blogged about his parents forcing him to enroll in the 'ex-gay' camp.

MORE INFO

Queer Action Coalition
www.qaconline.org

RELATED NEWS

[Teen blogs on forced trip to 'ex-gay' camp](#)

16-year-old says coming out prompted action by parents



[Printer-friendly Version](#)



[E-Mail this story](#)



[Search the Blade](#)



[Sound Off about this article](#)



[Bitch Session](#)

MORE NATIONAL NEWS

[Vatican nearing gay priest ban?](#)

Clergy form new group to support gay Catholics

[PlanetOut merger creates gay media giant](#)

CEO says no layoffs expected; PlanetOut.com may cater to lesbians

[Federal officials weigh rapid at-home HIV test](#)

AIDS groups say OraSure test must offer clear instructions, counseling

[Baptist universities spurn gay students, alum](#)

Denomination splits with Mercer; Baylor fires gay board member

[Judge frees gay 'Idol' reject charged in killing](#)

Gay Philly singer jailed for stabbing teen while fending off anti-gay attack

[Tampa man claims S&M; sex led to rape conviction](#)

Murder charges expected in drug, torture killings

"When I saw Zach had written in his blog, 'all I can think of is killing my mother and killing myself' I felt that clearly something needed to be said about the program," Friedman said.

No word from teen

Word of Zach's situation quickly spread around the blogosphere. By press time, more than 1,000 messages of support had been posted to Zach's blog and an online petition demanded that he be released from Love in Action. Comedian Margaret Cho contributed a message of support.

But Zach has not posted to his blog since the first week in June and sources contacted by the Blade would not confirm Zach's full name. His parents also could not be identified. Morgan Fox, 25, who said he was a friend of Zach's, said he believed Zach was in a two-week program.

Meanwhile, concerned citizens formed a group called the Queer Action Coalition. QAC began daily demonstrations in front of Love in Action offices to raise awareness of the dangers of "ex-gay" therapy.

Homosexuality is not considered an illness by the medical community and no major counseling or psychological organization supports therapy that aims to change a person's sexual orientation.

The American Psychological Association has said that it is unethical to subject an adolescent to reparative therapy.

According to Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays, "Several major professional organizations, including the American Psychological Association, the National Association of Social Workers, and the American Academy of Pediatrics, have all made statements against reparative therapy because of concerns for the harm caused to patients. The American Psychiatric Association has already taken clear stands against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation."

Peterson Toscano is a gay man who spent two years in the Love in Action program as the last stop in a 17-year struggle to suppress his sexual orientation.

He said that the program, which cost \$950 per month, was highly restrictive. While he was in the program he was forbidden to go to most parts of Memphis, could not touch other men and had to submit to lengthy meetings where participants criticized each other over the ways that they appeared to be gay. Clients at Love in Action had to describe their sexual fantasies and deviant behaviors in front of groups so that they would be shamed, Toscano said.

Toscano, who gave up his efforts in 1999, has written a play about his time at Love in Action called "Doing Time in the Homo No Mo' Half Way House."

Toscano has been in contact with QAC and the Memphis media and said he plans to travel to Memphis to perform his play for free this weekend.

Though his experience of Love in Action was as a consenting adult, Toscano expressed serious concern for adolescents who are forced to participate in what he characterized as an extremely damaging and misguided program.

Although the program is live-in for adults, teenagers are driven to the facility each day by their parents who are required to stay in a nearby hotel that is approved by Love in Action.

Toscano said that Smid has taken the 12-step program designed for drug addiction and is trying to apply it to homosexuality.

The "ex-gay" operators of the camp are themselves victims of a system that has convinced them that the only way that they can serve Jesus is to run an "ex-gay" facility, Toscano said.

"If they really understood that what they were doing was causing harm they would be horrified."

Psychotherapist Joe Kort echoed those sentiments.

[250 cities observe trans 'Day of Remembrance'](#)

Trans advocates call on gays to act as allies

[More National News](#)

Anti-gay Ohio councilmember loses election to gay man

advertisement



"My own judgment about reparative therapy is that it is a covert form of sexual abuse and assaultive to the sexuality of those who participate," he said. "Every mental health association has made a statement that reparative therapy is unethical and dangerous to the mental health of those who receive it."

Kort is an adjunct professor teaching gay and lesbian studies at Wayne State University's School of Social Work.

Jeffrey Ford is a licensed psychologist who served as a leader in the "ex-gay" movement for years but left and is now in private practice in Minnesota.

Ford said that Love in Action resembles a cult in that officials there monitor their clients' behavior and clients are not allowed to be alone with just one man or woman.

"Fear and threats play a big role. The biggest one being 'losing your salvation and going to hell,'" Ford said. "Suicide is perhaps the most dangerous consequence or side effect of RT. Since the therapy never works, the client feels like a failure. This always impacts self esteem."

Obligation to 'mold a child'

According to Julie Neils, spokesperson for Exodus International, an umbrella group for "ex-gay" projects, Love in Action's Refuge program is the only project they are affiliated with that focuses on gay teens.

Love in Action has only offered services to adolescents for two years. Administrator Tommy Corman said that the program has treated 23 adolescents and that there are currently two teenage boys in the program, both signed up for six-week programs.

Corman confirmed that teens are sometimes forced to participate in the programs, but dismissed the idea that this is wrong.

"Youth camps, vacation bible school, Sunday school, how many places do parents put their children against their will," Corman said. "It's like when I tell my three-year-old to take a bite of broccoli. You have a legal, moral and ethical obligation to mold a child."

Corman has worked at Love in Action for about a year and a half. He said that though the program advertises treatment for problems associated with drugs, alcohol and pornography, it is homosexuality, which the organization sees as a "deviant sexual behavior," that is the main focus of the program. Corman said that some clients come to Love in Action after de-toxing from drugs to "heal" themselves of homosexuality.

Corman said that he has helped clients convince insurance companies to cover the costs of the program.

Danny Cosby is the only staff member listed on the Love in Action Web site who is licensed by the state of Tennessee as a counselor.

Cosby is an alcohol and drug treatment counselor and works directly with the clients at Love in Action.

Cosby said that adolescents and adults are treated together as a group and that in addition to the two teenagers who are currently in the program there are between five and 15 adults. Cosby said that the presence of adults in the group is critical in helping teenagers "not glamorize the lifestyle."

Cosby asserted that absent fathers and enabling mothers can cause children to become gay.

Cosby downplayed the organization's focus on homosexuality.

A source in the State Board of Certification of Health Related Boards said that the ethical requirements for drug and alcohol counselors licensed in Tennessee forbid counselors to discriminate based on sexual orientation. The National Association for Addiction Professionals also requires that members not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation.

Dr. David Kaplan, chief professional officer of the American Counseling Association, said that it is a violation of that group's code of ethics for a counselor to practice outside of his area of training.

Dr. John Nardo, a psychiatrist in Georgia, is among those who have begun to publicly question the legality of forced treatment at Love in Action.



Protesters gather at **Love in Action** facility where a teenage blogger known as 'Zach' was reportedly sent by his parents, after coming out as gay.

Nardo said that if Love in Action were a mental health facility it would be bound by the Tennessee code that gives children 16 or older the same rights as an adult with respect to mental health treatment.

“To me this is something of an unimaginable situation, reminiscent of the mid-19th century when people were committed to hospitals by families for all sorts of things,” Nardo said. “Though it is possible that there are some other factors involved, Zack [sic] appears to be a person who has been deprived of his constitutional rights without due process of law — because he is gay.”

[national](#) | [local](#) | [world](#) | [health](#) | [letters](#) | [viewpoint](#) | [arts](#) | [classifieds](#) | [real estate](#) | [about us](#)

© 2005 | [A Window Media Publication](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)