

I HATED MYSELF

David Miranda, 17

By the time I was eleven, I already knew I was gay and I hated myself for it. I hated myself so much that I wanted to kill myself. I wanted to be "normal." I didn't want God to punish me and give me AIDS. I didn't want to go to Hell.

Every day after school I would go to church. "Please give me the strength to change myself," I would pray. "Please, please, please." I always expected God to answer me but She or He never did. I remember one day at school one of the kids in my class asked a teacher, "Does God always answer your prayers?" The teacher replied, "Yes, no matter what, in one form or another, God will always answer your prayers." Not mine.

I even made a vow that if God would make me heterosexual I would become a priest. After church I would go home and read the entire Bible. All I remember about being eleven is praying. Every Saturday I went to confession. I would confess everything except that I had gay feelings. On Sundays I made sure I went to mass. None of it worked.

"Why me?" I'd ask myself over and over again. I saw myself as a freak of nature, a devil. All that I ever knew about gay men at the time were the stereotypes and lies that my parents taught me: that they were child molesters and wanted to be women.

"*Sientate bien,*" my father would tell me. "*Camina como hombre.*" ("Learn how to sit right. Walk like a real man.") He said these

things to me so many times that I can still hear him.

My parents taught me that gay people were not people at all. Driving through the West Village I remember them laughing at the *maricas*, and trying to imitate gay people by saying "*Ay, chus,*" and acting like stereotypical homosexuals. This taught me that gay people didn't deserve any respect. So how was I supposed to feel when I discovered that I was gay? How is one supposed to feel when you find out that you are a freak, a pervert, a piece of human sh-t?

One day I told my friend, John (not his real name), that I was planning to kill myself. I asked him how I should do it. "Why don't you try mothballs?" he said. John was supposed to be my best friend. I figured that if my best friend didn't care whether or not I died, then no one would. I knew that I was alone and that there was no one I could turn to. I was scared of people.

That's when I made up my mind to do it. I was scared and felt I didn't deserve to live. It was as if there were a knife lodged in my chest that I couldn't take out. I thought about different ways to kill myself. I went to my roof and looked down, but I was too scared to jump. I figured that Windex could kill a person, so I drank a whole bottle. It didn't even make me sick.

Then I decided to swallow a whole bottle of Tylenol. I drank it down with iced tea, and every time I took another pill I felt glad that I was that much closer to death and that much farther from having to live a miserable life. I closed my eyes and went to sleep hoping it was all over and I'd never have to wake up again.

All I remember from that night was waking up in the darkness every half hour to throw up. I felt as if there was some monster inside of me that just wanted to come out. I remember leaning over the toilet bowl and feeling dirty, and hearing my father say, "Let it out, let it out, you'll feel better." But I just kept throwing up over and over again.

The next morning when I opened my eyes, I felt as if I had spent a night in Hell. I realized that nothing had changed. I still had to deal

with my stepmother, who was always hitting me, and on Monday I'd have to deal with the idiots at school again who always brought up the word "f—got."

I went to a guidance counselor and, without telling her that I was gay, told her what had happened. I made up a story about a friend dying. By that time I already knew that the best way to keep my secret was by lying.

The counselor called my father and he rushed to school. She told me to step outside while she talked to him. I waited anxiously, wondering what my dad would do when he came out.

Instead of yelling at me, my normally grumpy father was nicer than I'd ever seen him before. "You're my son and I love you," he told me. "Why would you do something so stupid?" You could tell that he was trying to do everything in his power not to upset me. In a way I was glad because he was giving me a lot of attention. He took me out to eat and talked about moving out of New York City. But in another way it was so fake that it made me uncomfortable.

The guidance counselor told him that I needed to go to the hospital because there was a possibility that the Tylenol could have done physical damage. At least that was the excuse that they gave me to convince me to go to a psychiatric hospital for three months.

I will never forget the fears that went through my mind when they told me I would have to go to a mental hospital. I imagined a place full of crazy people who would try to hurt me. I also imagined a deranged psychiatrist who would put doses of harmful medication in my food.

It turned out that the three months that I spent at the hospital were actually fun. I woke up every morning and went to group meetings and activities. It was the first time that I actually had friends. Up to that time I had tried my hardest to avoid other people my age. I felt that nobody would like me. I hated people.

At the hospital I was with people who actually liked me. They were all older, about sixteen or seventeen, and to them I was the cute

little kid. I enjoyed the way they were treating me. During meals we would talk and I would laugh. I know that doesn't sound like much, but laughing and being happy were rare for me in those days. At the end of each day we would go to the gym and work out. It was all a lot of fun. And my parents were nicer to me than they had ever been before.

After three months I was out of the hospital. I had lied my way through the whole therapy, saying that my only problems were my best friend who had committed suicide, the fact that I had no friends, and that I hated myself. The one time the subject of homosexuality came up I just said, "It's weird. I don't understand how anyone cannot like women." They believed everything and then sent me to live with my mother in Brooklyn.

In Brooklyn I found new friends. I continued to live a lie, however. One day I went home and swallowed another bottle of Tylenol, for no reason other than to make myself suffer through another hellish night. Another time I took twenty of my mother's blood pressure pills. I felt that I had no reason to live. My vision of myself as an adult was as a lonely miserable person who would never be accepted by society. The idea of dying in my sleep was very attractive.

I would go to school and chill with my friends and we'd lie to each other about how many girls we'd had. I got into a lot of fights because at that age kids would call each other "f--got." I would get extremely offended by this word, and I would beat up anyone who said it to me. Some of my friends would ask me, "Why do you get so offended when people call you f—got if you know you're not?"

I would ask myself: How did they know what I was or was not? I was still afraid to admit to myself that I was gay. I started asking girls out and lying to myself by telling myself that girls were my thing. I started to date them and I enjoyed it. I enjoyed them as far as friendship was concerned, but I didn't see it going beyond that.

Junior high school was a total flop for me. I did everything to

prove my manhood. I stole cars, picked fights, and went on rampages in the train, "catching herbs" with older kids and cutting school. I went from the class nerd to the most likely to drop out.

I got out of it all when I decided to go to a high school that was outside my neighborhood. All of my "friends" were going to the neighborhood high school, so I now had the chance to go and make some new friends in a place where nobody knew anything about me.

On my first day a question was haunting me: "What if people find out?" I was terrified out of my mind.

At first I made many friends, but then I would close up and stop talking to them. I was so afraid of being found out that I would stop going to school just so that I didn't have to deal with people. When I did go I started monitoring my every move. I would be scared to talk, walk, or even look at anyone. I felt as if I had the word "f—got" stamped on my forehead.

Eventually I was put in "holding power," which is a nice way of saying truant class. I was just waiting for my sixteenth birthday so that I could drop out.

It was during high school that I found that I needed a place to meet other gay people. I knew there were places like that out there, but I didn't know how to get in touch with them. I decided that I was going to ask a guidance counselor for places to go. I wasn't sure whether it was the right thing for me to do. I kept thinking about it for weeks. What if he called my parents? What if he laughed at me? What if they threw me out of school?

Finally I arranged to talk with a guidance counselor. My heart raced and my palms were sweaty as I prepared to tell the first person ever about my big secret.

"How can I help you?" Mr. Smith, my guidance counselor, asked me.

"I have a very big problem," I said. Then came the big bomb: "I think I might be gay."

He just smiled and said, "And?"

My first thought was, "Is this a joke?"

All at once I was relieved and shocked to find that the first person I told didn't freak out. The experience gave me a lot of confidence. It helped me to realize that I was being too hard on myself.

Mr. Smith told me about the Hetrick-Martin Institute for Gay and Lesbian Youth. At HMI they had an after-school center where I met other gay and lesbian teens. I couldn't believe that there were other people out there who were going through the same thing I was.

At Hetrick-Martin I got to know kids from all over the city, and of all races. It didn't matter that everyone was gay. What mattered was that everyone was cool. It was a place where I didn't have to hide who I was and where I could just be myself.

At first I kind of felt uncomfortable being around other gay people. The trouble was that after pretending to be somebody else for so long, I really didn't know who I was. The only thing I had thought about since I was eleven years old was what was I going to do about this gay sh-t. At fourteen, I didn't know how to think about anything else.

Then I found that I was not only gay, I also liked to have fun. I liked to go to the movies. I liked to hang out and chill with my friends, and I loved to listen to music. I was smart. I liked to do things that anybody else liked to do. I was a human being just like everybody else; I just happened to be gay. I didn't admit that to myself until I was fourteen.

It was around this time that I started my first relationship. His name was Chris. I met him at HMI and I found that I liked talking to him. We would hang out with our friends, go to clubs, or just chill and talk. I found that with Chris I felt happier than I had ever felt with any girl. Our relationship was totally based on friendship and respect.

Through all of this I was still cutting school and my mom would get suspicious about my hanging out late at night. Sometimes I

would come home high on an acid tab and try to act as if I weren't high. I didn't care anymore about school. My only concerns became clubs, my friends, and hanging out.

Finally my mother got fed up with everything and kicked me out of my house and sent me to my father's house. She told me I would amount to nothing and that I would be a bum when I grew up.

I hated my father's house. He would put so many restrictions on me that I wasn't used to. I had to be home by 11:30 p.m. If I wasn't home my father would yell and scream and let me have it. I hated having to put up with that. It was around this time that I was trying to let my parents know that I was gay. I was fed up with living a lie.

One day I arrived home and my father was sitting on the couch watching TV. It was a Friday night and it was only 10:30. "Where were you?" my father yelled.

"I was out," I told him.

"What were you doing?"

By this point I was quite angry. I mean, who did this man think he was to be screaming on my time? I wasn't a little kid, and I was sick and tired of him telling me how to act, what to do, when to do it, and with whom. So I told him that it was none of his business where I was and that he should stay the hell out of my life. That got him very upset.

All of a sudden he grabbed me. "Damn it, you're my son," he said, "and I want to know what you're doing." He started to cry and demanded I tell him if I was using drugs, if I had a girlfriend, a job? But the question that really hurt me was, "Are you a f—got?" It wasn't so much the question itself as the way he asked me. He had the most hateful look on his face, as if he were literally ready to kill someone.

"Let me get the hell out of this house," I yelled. "I don't want to live here anymore."

"You're not leaving this house until you tell me what you're up to," he said.

"Let me go or I swear I'm going to jump out of that window," I replied. The only problem was that the window was five stories up, and I meant what I said.

He started to grab me and hit me. I was screaming and telling him that I was going to kill him. I was actually very scared. He kept telling me to shut up because the neighbors were listening. I told him I wanted them to hear. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to open the door and leave, but he wouldn't let me.

My heart was beating fast and I was gasping for air and crying. I pushed him away, ran for the window, opened it, and was ready to jump, when my father grabbed me. He became very afraid for me, and he said that he was very sorry, and begged me to forgive him. I said that it was all right.

The next day was Saturday and my father called me from his job and told me in a really nice way that in the afternoon we were going to the doctor. I asked why. "You know, just to get a checkup," he said. Later in the day he came to pick me up.

When we walked into the office the doctor asked me, "So what's the problem?"

"This ain't a doctor," I thought. "This is a therapist." I was upset that my father had lied to me and afraid that I would have to spend more time at the hospital. The doctor recommended to my father that I be admitted to Jacobi Hospital. Once I got there they took a lot of blood from me, and then locked me up in a glass room with this man who smelled really bad and who kept talking to himself. Then they gave me this nasty food.

Later they made me talk to a social worker. He kept asking me what was wrong, but I wouldn't tell him. I didn't tell him anything, but he still felt that he had the right to tell my father that he thought I was gay.

After a few hours I was sent to another hospital in the Bronx just for teens and then, after about a week, transferred back to the hospital I had been in when I was twelve. My father and mother would

talk to me about how much they loved me and how they would support me in anything I did.

I felt angry and confused because I had never told them anything or officially "come out" to them—someone else had. I felt bad that my parents had to go through all this. I knew they were sad and that they didn't want me to be gay. To be honest, if I had a choice I would not have chosen to be gay either. Who in the world would choose to go through all the name calling, all the bashings, and all the other crap gay people have to go through every day?

In a way I was glad that my parents found out while I was in the hospital because I didn't have to go through the coming-out experience by myself. I had social workers and other people there for me. We would have family therapy where they would put my mother, father, and me with a social worker to talk about what life would be like for me when I left the hospital. It was agreed that I would go back to live with my mother, and a contract was drawn up about what the rules would be.

My parents and I would have heated arguments about what school I would go to and about my being gay. I told them it wasn't any of their business who I slept with. They disagreed and said I was just confused and that I would grow out of it. They would talk to me about AIDS, trying to scare me into not being gay.

I told them that I already knew a lot about AIDS and ways to prevent getting it. They acted as if I was stupid and didn't know anything. I would tell them about ways you can and cannot get it, and that if I had sex I would always use a condom no matter what the circumstances. I also told them that I was not sexually active, which was true. They acted as if I would get AIDS from the air just because I was gay. They were so ignorant in so many ways.

My mother and I would talk about what my being gay meant to our relationship. I explained to her that I was still the same person and that it didn't matter. My mother would tell me that she was upset because she was not going to have any grandchildren from

me. That made me angry. "Who are you thinking about," I asked her, "you or me?"

After two months I left the hospital and went to live with my mother. I decided to go to the Harvey Milk School, a high school for gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, and things have gotten a lot better since then. I have plenty of friends and am happy with my life. Coming out to my family was hard, but now that I have, I can tell my parents almost anything and they give me all the support in the world. I'm also involved in a lot of political causes as well as writing for a teen magazine. And I'm graduating this month and will be going to college next year.

I know now that I didn't really want to die. If I had, I never would have been able to accomplish any of these things. What I really wanted was to live in a world where I wouldn't have to deal with people's prejudices.

I realize now that suicide is no way out. It's a permanent solution to a temporary problem. There's always another solution even when it seems like there isn't. For me, asking for help and coming out were two big steps towards learning to accept myself and not let other people's stereotypical perceptions of gay people put me down.