

Most of us have a traditional life who are lucky enough to feel the love of our parents unconditionally. If their aspect depends on your preferences of identity and you want to change a significant aspect of your identity, what would happen? As a gay teenager who grows up in a traditional Christian family, Garrard Conley seeks the answer to that question.

There are many challenges in Conley's life like fear, rejection, and confusion as he grew up in a society with the ex-gay movement that accepts homosexuality as a curable sin. Parallel to ex-gay movement beliefs, Conley accepted to stay in an ex-gay facility for two weeks to be cured that rescue him and other gay men and women from "addiction" to homosexuality. In here, we will accompany to Conley by examining the damages, shocking practices and heart-wrenching outcomes of the therapy and learn the real meaning of being a gay in a small town in the Southern United States.

## Like alcoholism, homosexuality was taught as a curable sin by the ex-gay movement.

Being a young person means freedom and experience of different things for most of us. However, it is not the case for everyone. For instance, the author Garrard Conley was opposed to discovering what really his identity is at the young age of 19. In place of this, he is taught to disregard a significant part of his identity.

Defacement of Conley started as he participated in an intensive two-week treatment program promising to cure his "addiction" in 2004. Love in Action that is a fundamentalist Christian organization was providing the program. Conley's sexuality that his desire of other men is what the organization and program call as "addiction".

Love in Action was a member of a wider and international organization called Exodus International. As the world's largest ex-gay organization, Exodus International organized in many countries like Brazil, Australia, the Netherlands, and the Philippines.

The ex-gay movement's main responsibility was opposing homosexuality and propagate it as a sexual deviation created by the devil. However, the movement also propagated that this defect can be "cured" by attending an intensive treatment program like the one Conley participated.

The Love in Action “recovery” program contains course following 12-step for participants. In each step, the main principle was propagating homosexuality as a sin like pedophilia and bestiality. To do this, the organization uses many bad examples such Conley faced on the website of Love in Action before joining the program. Conley shocked when he read that homosexuals are people without self-control and if they did not treat the desire would make them to sex with animals.

Love in Action also classifies homosexuality with the same group of bad habits like gambling or alcoholism. In this point, the organization equates itself with Alcoholics Anonymous distinctly it is not alcoholics but homosexuals who wanted to be cured.

When Conley went to the center of the program, they told him that just like drug or alcohol users, he is using homosexuality and which is a sin to fill the emptiness in his life. The program leader told him that what he should do to give up homosexuality is to fill these feelings with the love of God.

Although the time Conley spent in the ex-gay movement is short, his journey with Love in Action had a significant impact on his life.

## **Program participants were excluded from anything that could threaten traditional gender norms.**

What forms our identity? Is it formed by the people we are standing with or the clothes we are wearing or the books we read? Love in Action program investigates everything like clothing, books, and jewelry that Conley had and may associate with his identity. After that, Conley examines these questions from the beginning.

The program encourages participants’ true which defined as heterosexual gender identities as a recovery action. Everything that might prevent this process and emergence of heterosexual identities is called False Image and is seized. The signs of False Image can be for instance sexy clothing; tank tops, use of a good deal of jewelry or “campy” speeches for men and wearing too short skirts for women. For instance, to increase femininity of women, at least two times in a week they are required to shave their legs and armpits.

Moreover, organizers of the program thought that the short stories written by Conley present a False Image and probably play a significant role in his distract from true gender identity. But what makes them think like that? In fact, one of the stories had been written from a female's perspective and this should be the main reason. Moreover, some part of his writings especially where he describes nature is found to be showy, feminine and this is a sign of moral weakness. Such things are not accepted as real men concerns for Love in Action. As a result, they demolished one of the stories and distracted to writings.

It is not only personal things but also social things were found guilty in the program.

The sinful influence is not only personal but it can be seen in everywhere according to Love in Action. Thinking that composers like Bach and Beethoven were not Christians, the center forbids classical music. Anything about yoga, astrology and the fantasy game Dungeons and Dragons are also forbidden speculating that they are all sinful. Before attending to the program, Conley put away everything except the Bible and the Love in Action Handbook.

## Participants of The Love in Action felt that the only choice they have is “treatment” of homosexuality.

It is not usual to decide about taking a “treatment” that try to clear some part of our identity. However, most of the participants of the Love in Action program think that they had no other option.

Many of the participants that joined to program with Conley came from Bible Belt that is the place lying in the South of the America where the attendance to church is high and religion is a significant determinant in the social life.

In Bible Belt, prejudice against gay people are so terrifying compared to any other part of the country and most of the participants experienced discrimination. Almost all the participants told that their parents wanted them to “cure” their homosexuality otherwise they would be marginalized from their families. Due to all these threats; homelessness, being excluded from church and their society, poverty; most of the participant feel that they should be cured.

Unfortunately, participants of the Program also internalized homophobia that is imposed by society. Most of them also believed the stories about homosexuality: the homosexuals have

also had sexual and drug addictions and inevitably they would die because of AIDS. Moreover, other than families, media is another institute that propagates these homophobic ideas. For instance, when Conley was young almost all movies showed gay people as the victims of AIDS.

Many of the participants preferred to stay for months and also years in the center to cure themselves. Moreover, many young participants left their universities to spend more time in the center and to protect themselves from “dangerous” liberal thoughts.

Many of the old participants who didn't want to re-enter society also preferred to stay in the center and work there as the center's staff. To become a worker of the center, the former participant should approve to contact only with people whose sexuality had cleared by the program. Moreover, they are not allowed to visit secular places like non-christian bookshops and shopping malls during their free time.

Some young people were in the center unwillingly whose parents forced them to be cured and since they were minors they couldn't leave the center.

## Sometimes the program of The Love in Action caused trauma and led suicide.

Due to prejudices, discrimination, and living like minorities; many of the participants had already experienced trauma before joining to the Love in Action program. Unfortunately, many of them had worsened through the program. What is worst, the program leaders made some people commit suicide.

Conley was one of the participants who severe trauma before participating in the program.

Conley's father was an evangelical Baptist preacher, and he came from a fundamentalist Christian society similar to many people in the ex-gay movement. Probably and it is not a surprise when Conley was a teenager, his parents didn't know anything about his sexual preference. Conley was raped by his friend at least Conley was thinking they were friends during his first year in the college. Moreover, his rapists spoke with Conley's parents and said the fact that Conley was gay.

Conley was only 19 years old, when he should cope with two traumas at the same time: being raped and marginalized by his family.

As soon as Conley's mother spoke with Conley's rapist, she took Conley from college and closed him to the house. Conley was shocked when he turned back to home. Then, his father gave him a "chance" such that he should be cured if he wanted to continue his education. If he didn't threaten, his father also refused to pay for his education, and he should forget college forever. Conley chose to participate in Love in Action under this dense pressure.

Later, he experienced that the treatment served by Love in Action is not a good option for the ones who had traumatic experiences.

Once John Smid, one of the leaders of the program, spoke with a vulnerable participant and told him that it is better to commit suicide instead of living as a gay man. Unfortunately, approximately 30 former program participants committed suicide after the treatment program.

A former participant told that in the 1990s Smid organized a mock funeral for another participant who was thinking to leave the program and live as a free gay man. During the funeral, the gay man lies down and others read his fake obituary notice. This incident was traumatized after many years.

**The counselors of the Love in Action believed that homosexuality was caused by a deficiency in childhood and influenced by Satan.**

In fact, no one has a specific answer to the reason for being gay. However, and as expected, the Love in Action had one. They thought and propagate that the reason behind being gay is a deficiency in one's childhood and the devil's surrounding one during that time.

When he was in the program, the group consultant of Conley was Danny Cosby who is a former alcoholic. Do you think Cosby had necessary qualifications for being a consultant in the program? For sure, no.

What Love in Action thinks that Cosby is qualified enough due to his alcoholism and treatment and can cure any addictions including homosexuality.

In his lectures of masculinity, Cosby told to participants that they were gay since in their childhood they didn't play sports enough. Cosby believed that sports in childhood make boys be grown up as a healthy, physical male and lack of it lead an "unhealthy" development that is reflected as gay feelings in older ages. Moreover, he thought that homosexuality is similar to heroin addiction. According to him since heroin addiction can be cured, so does homosexuality.

In addition to all, the program also pointed to Satan's influence as one of the causes of homosexuality. Participants should accept this fact and their sinfulness and only after that they could get rid of this bad addiction.

At each night, the program organized a "Moral Inventory" that Conley and his fellow participants have participated. At these instructions, participants were forced to think about their sinfulness. In each session, they should find a sinful example from their past which includes a sexual impropriety. Then each should write the example in details and next day share it with all others. Then the others in the group should provide feedback to make writer understand how shameful the example he experienced is, how much Satan influenced to writer's behavior and the way they could live more virtuous.

**Although the ex-gay movement has been broken up, it has an influence on former members.**

Opposing his parents, Conley left the program. At the end of the two weeks in the center, he realized that the program offered by the center may drive him to end even committing suicide.

Meanwhile, both Love in Action and the rooting ex-gay organization Exodus International have been broken up. However, the impact of the ex-gay movement still remains for the former members like Conley.

After years of terrible moments of Conley in Love in Action, John Smid as the leader of the program confessed that they have already known that the program was not able to change

the sexual preferences of the participants and refused the ex-gay movement. In other words, he accepted that there is no way to “made” someone heterosexual.

After all, Smid publicly apologized for what he has done as a member of the ex-gay movement. In fact, today many of the ex-gay leaders and counselors are doing so. Currently, some American evangelical Christians are still trying to export ex-gay movement ideology to other countries like Uganda but there remain very few “treatment” facilities by 2016.

Today, the movement is not a force in Southern part of the US anymore, including the author the former members are living its after-effects.

After leaving the center, it was impossible for Conley to get in contact with others and trust anyone for at least the next decade. Moreover, his beliefs in religion also collapsed. What is the reason? Due to the ideology propagated by Love in Action, it is impossible for him to believe in God without thinking the sinfulness of himself. Passing a decade after the “treatment”, Conley doesn’t have any belief in God anymore.

His mother is also one of the apologies for the “treatment”, but it is sad that Conley and his father are still distant and the relationship between them is cold nothing more than one sentence emails. Moreover, due to the movement and parent’s strain to “treatment”, Conley believes that family ties will not recover again.

## Boy Erased: A Memoir of Identity, Faith, and Family by Garrard Conley Book Review

As one of the many others, Conley has been dramatically affected by his experience in the ex-gay movement. Even after many years of therapy, the movement use all these people had like identities and religious beliefs against them to make their LGBT identities confused, fearful and guilty.

<https://goodbooksummary.com/boy-erased-by-garrard-conley-book-summary/>

