

Breaking the Silence:

An Interview with a Gay Sex Offender

By Euan Bear

You're about to meet Wayne Bowers, a recovering sex offender who is gay. I've met him several times when we spoke together on panels at conferences for social workers and therapists who deal with child sexual abuse. I was there to speak as an adult survivor of child sexual abuse. Wayne looks slim and fit and is distinguished looking, a very dapper dresser. His mustachioed face shows curiosity, warmth, and openness. He's one of the guys most people never hear about, both because he's a treatment success story and because he's gay. He doesn't always come out as a gay man during his speeches — he's as wary of the stereotype as the gay community is. He has spoken at conferences, on television, and to men in the sex offender treatment program at the Northwest Regional Correctional Center in St. Albans. At his most recent speaking engagement in Vermont, a speakout for male survivors and recovering offenders held at St. Michael's College, he agreed to an interview for Out in the Mountains.

EB: When did you know you were gay? Were you an adult or an adolescent? Was there any option of coming out to your family and getting support?

Growing up in Oklahoma in a conservative church background and with a tight knit family structure, and the lack of information about gay issues back in the 1950s and 1960s, I didn't even know the terms "gay" or "straight" as we do now. So, the early days were just a realization of a certain attraction to boys, but I was not able to put a label on it. All my comments now are based on what I've learned about myself, not thoughts I had then. I recall first having some sexual encounters with boys when I was 5 or 6 and that type of activity occurred periodically over about 8 more years in what I would refer to as experimental exploration.

I realize now that I had an attraction to boys, even kept a log of boys I found appealing in a high school directory, and I didn't do the same for girls. I recall how difficult it was to ask a girl out for a date — and

now it is quite clear to me — I didn't want to take a girl on a date, I wanted to take a boy. But that didn't even enter my mind that it was an option. I don't think I saw an option to "come out" to my family, for I didn't understand that was what the situation was. I was awkward about dating through high school and even into college and beyond. Other high school buddies didn't date until their senior year, so we didn't see anything strange. I did date one girl most of my senior year, she was a sophomore. I do recall it never got intimate, and though she was fun, I can see I wasn't "head over heels" over her.

With that in mind, it is one reason why I am so supportive of glbt discussion groups and support groups in high schools and colleges today — to help young people deal with those same feelings and issues I had back then (and had nowhere to turn).

I recall the first guy to show me how to masturbate was when an older boy in our class showed a couple buddies and me how he could do so, and though I could not physically perform at that time, I awkwardly fell into that act in the 6th grade.

Around the 4th and 5th grades I had a crush (I guess you would say) on my neighbor who was a year older. Much of it was a sports adoration and just the fact he was a year older. But I recall us playing "doctor" and doing things naked and all and I was real attracted to him. I recall I had a bedwetting problem and one year he traveled with us on a vacation and I was so scared I would wet the bed and it would be embarrassing. That actually is one area of therapy that I have not covered yet and know there is some stuff I need to uncover that may play a role in my later behavior.

When did I know I was gay? To understand that term totally, it was not until I was in therapy in prison the 2nd time, after going through the Johns Hopkins evaluation and crash course of 4 months before sentencing in 1983. I then pieced together my pedophilic [prepubertal boy-loving] and hebophilic [adolescent boy-loving] patterns and behavior and learned a control, but I still hadn't reached a resolve on my sexual identity.

It actually surfaced quite well through interaction with a

therapist in a Kansas prison. I had gotten started in therapy, and a new facility right by the old place opened. [Bowers was transferred as a "model prisoner," cutting short his participation in a therapy program.] I was very upset, knowing I had to complete a [therapy] pro-

gram for my parole hearing. But my attorney spoke with Ms. Austin, who stated ... that she would call me in for testing and interviews periodically.

[That process] led to a lot of repeat answers on the MMPI that, along with an autobiogra-

phy I wrote for the former program, gave Ms. Hall an inkling of some closeted feelings I was showing. And she did a good job of working through those with me individually and finally in a group, to where I eventually accepted the fact I was gay. That would have been in

The Vermont Connection

Wayne Bowers, who lives in Michigan, in many ways fits the old stereotype of a gay pedophile. He was in a position where he had access to lots of boys, whom he befriended and then introduced to sexual activities. Wayne was in his 20s and 30s and the boys ranged in age from 9 or 10 to 16. I wondered if gay men in Vermont had been approached in childhood by an older gay man and whether they thought it influenced their sexuality.

I posted a request for research help on VT PrideNet, Mountain Pride Media's online listserv, asking any gay or bisexual men to respond if their first same-sex encounter was when they were under 18 and was with a male more than 5 years older. I also asked who made the advance. The notice was reposted once a week for three weeks.

I received 6 responses regarding early sexual experiences among gay or bisexual men, and some of them didn't quite fit the criteria. All respondents gave permission to have their remarks quoted anonymously.

One respondent wrote: "I was five or six and he was 17 or 18, a neighbor I didn't know at all well. He made the advance, though there was nothing violent or really coercive about it, and I was definitely curious. I realize that this is technically child molestation, and it was certainly wrong for so many reasons, but it wasn't anything like the predatory pedophile stories that make the news. My first adolescent sexual experience was at age 13 or 14, but it was with a friend who was one year younger than me, so that doesn't really count in your survey. When I was 16 there was a guy in his late 20s who propositioned me, but I declined — not because of the age difference, but because I wasn't interested in him personally."

Another man wrote: "My first experiences were with males my own age. It was a 'show me yours' and 'how far will you go' type of interaction. I was eventually involved with an older man when I was in my late teens, but by this time I already was very clear about who I was and with whom I wanted to be sexual/intimate. The older man was in his mid-twenties and I was 17. The relationship lasted about 3 years."

One respondent said his first same-sex sexual encounter was at age 19 with another guy the same age: "... and it came out of conversation. We each knew the other was 'bi' at that time. I am a bit disturbed by the predatory nature of some of the older men I've met, and it's entirely turned me off to men more than 15-20 years older than me."

Another man said, "For me ... I was 14, the other guy was 28, and it was definitely mutually initiated ... however, I think now as an older wiser person that it was not a good thing, even though I was completely willing.

No coercion."

One respondent simply reported that he fit the criteria and offered no other comment: "I fit the category of having sex before age 18 with a man more than 5 years older. He made the advance."

The sixth respondent said his same-sex sexual encounters started when he was "15/16 years old. Until I was 19 it was always with boys I grew up with in my neighborhood. Most of these encounters were one-time deals [which] only were repeated [with] two individuals."

Given the small number of responses, I asked therapist Walter Zeichner, who has been active in the sexual abuse survivor movement, to comment on several related issues. He suggested that we don't hear much about male survivors of childhood sexual abuse (even though we know that male and female children under the age of puberty report sexual abuse in comparable numbers) because it's "more threatening to the patriarchy to acknowledge it."

Then again, many women dealt with their experiences by forming support groups, while it is notoriously difficult to get male sexual abuse survivors to form or join such groups. Zeichner acknowledged that perception. "I do not know of any groups in Vermont for male victims of sexual abuse. It's difficult to get men into groups of any kind. Maybe it's not just culture, but also biology — that competitive thing. Male clubs exist but they don't acknowledge as part of their intention any kind of emotional work. I'm sure it happens, but it's not acknowledged as part of their purpose."

Asked to comment on the stereotype boys are "often" initiated into homosexuality by older gay men, Zeichner said, "That stereotype is changing as more young people are coming out with more ease. Gay youth are finally having more normal psychosexual development. I see a difference based on the amount of emotional scarring. Guys in their 20s are into their peers, less into older sexual partners. There's a less clandestine quality to adolescent psychosexual development."

He continued, "Society's oppression of gays and lesbians must stop. Nancy Sheltra should get on her fucking knees and kiss Outright Vermont's asses" for their work in helping Vermont teens realize healthier options. "Because the more gays and lesbians are oppressed, the more likely they are to explore and express their sexuality in ways that are potentially detrimental to themselves" such as in inappropriate relationships with younger kids or with exploitive adults. "Outright Vermont is preventing child sexual abuse by encouraging the healthy development of a sexual identity."