



MATT COMER

Editor
Age: 22

Matt Comer's words are a harsh reminder to those in big-city bubbles with constant Internet access—and even gay TV—of the struggle that young gays and lesbians still face in so many parts of the country. Even his family has had to bear the pain of this bigotry. Parents of some friends of Matt's younger brother have refused to let their children come to the house when Matt is there, for instance.

Although Matt is still shunned by his Southern Baptist church community in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, he has nonetheless refused to give up his spiritual life or the religion he was raised in simply because he is gay.

Today, at twenty-two, Matt is the editor of *Q-Notes*, a gay news publication in the Carolinas.

“Put all the queers on a ship, cut a hole in the side, and send it out to sea,” my pastor said with a half-smile and eerily happy eyes. For years, that statement and others like it were part and parcel of my childhood religious teachings at my small, conservative Baptist church right outside Winston-Salem, North Carolina. With the stereotypical rabidity of a Southern country preacher, my pastor condemned gay and lesbian people from the pulpit almost every Sunday. So conservative that the Southern Baptist Convention seems almost liberal by comparison, my church was a place full of hatred and bigotry. Though the people there were family to me, their sheer disdain and disgust toward gays was a fact of life.

How does an eleven- or twelve-year-old “preacher boy” with a promising future in the church—one who had already gained the respect of being called brother—come out as the very thing so hated and condemned by the people he loves and cherishes as family? With such a heavy burden added to the almost unbearable weight every adolescent feels naturally, I had only one option: Faith in Christ and His everlasting love was my only solace.

People ask, “How can you continue to have such great faith?” The answer is simple: When everyone around you seems as though they’d be the first to cast you out, a person has only Christ to turn to. But to be fair, even

the presence of God wasn’t always enough. Many times the unthinkable became plausible—a way out of the life I’d come to despise.

“Many times the unthinkable became plausible—a way out of the life I’d come to despise.”

Those thoughts of suicide didn’t last long, though. I believed suicide would have sent me straight to the depths of hell, landing me in the same spot as being gay. So, I turned to begging and pleading. I tried compromising with what I had been taught God wanted.

Alone in my bedroom, I’d lie on the bed, crying and praying, “Well, God, what if I’m bi and I eventually get married? If I try my very best to not think about guys the way I do, will you still condemn me?” It wasn’t just the act of being with a guy that scared me. I thought just thinking about guys was enough to send me to hell.

The summer before eighth grade, I began doing odd jobs for my uncle. He owned a business downtown just close enough to walk to from my

school, so I was able to continue working there when classes started again in the fall.

It was through this opportunity that I eventually found the strength and courage to find the answers I so desperately needed. My family didn't own a computer, so my only option was the public library—which was one block from my uncle's company. In addition to the religious bigotry at church, my library visits might be the only other childhood experience I have in common with gays who were teenagers long before I was born. However, unlike the scant and often negative information they found there, the texts I read at the library were positive and uplifting. In the corner of the second-floor nonfiction section, I'd gorge myself on stories of gays living proudly in such far-off places as New York and San Francisco. One of the first books I had the courage to check out was *One Teenager in Ten*. Teenagers just like me? I was in heaven. I finally began to understand that I wasn't alone. I wasn't sick. I wasn't worthy of death. And I wasn't headed to hell.

And yet, I wasn't totally convinced. I'd go home and, like hundreds of times before, read Leviticus. My death was on my own hands—my sin was my own fault, it said. No matter how many books I read to the contrary, I couldn't help but still think I was a sinner. I stayed at my church.

Over the next few months, I continued to read both my Bible and the books I checked out of the library. I'd compare the two and then pray. I'd cry and then plead with God. I'd fall asleep and do it all again the next day.

I don't know exactly when it happened, but I eventually became more comfortable with myself. The pain I felt when hearing my pastor's sermons subsided. In its place, I felt anger. How could he say those awful things? I wondered.

The rubber band I wore on my wrist—to snap whenever I thought about my male middle school crush—had to come off. And my church and preacher had only themselves to blame for what came next. They had raised a future fire-and-brimstone preacher, full of conviction and a hardheaded spirit, and those were all the life lessons I needed once I found the courage to speak out. Right after turning fourteen, at the end of my final year in middle school, the doors of the closet swung wide open. The Bible-toting, scripture-quoting preacher boy of only a few months prior turned into the most flamboyant, outspoken queer teen Winston-Salem had ever seen.

When I found out about a gay youth support group in town, I told myself I was going no matter what. Against my mother's wishes, I made my way to a place where, for the first time, I was surrounded by people who loved me just as I was, without reservation. I felt whole. I felt safe. It was ecstasy.

But that didn't stop the condemnation I continued to feel from my church. Although I eventually quit going to the weekly church services I'd attended

“The Bible-toting, scripture-quoting preacher boy of only a few months prior turned into the most flamboyant, outspoken queer teen Winston-Salem had ever seen.”

every Sunday for my whole life, I still had to deal with the religious bigotry the church had instilled in others around me. My mother said I was crazy and sick and told me I was going to hell. It wasn't until I ran away from home that she started resolving the outright

hatred of that part of me she couldn't understand.

The summer before my first year in high school, while flipping through the channels on TV, I saw the Millennium March on Washington broadcast live on C-SPAN. Two teenagers just barely older than me were speaking about a school club called a gay-straight alliance. My mind went crazy with plans of how to start one as soon as I began school. And luck was on my side: I wasn't the only teen in my school system attempting to “start trouble.”

And trouble it was. The school board battled the Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) like they were waging war. As the students at the other school in my district finally won their right to start their group, I put my plans in action. I approached my principal and started R. J. Reynolds High School's first-ever gay club. My mother condemned my involvement in the group, and for a time things were very tense at home.

Sometime that year, though, my mom began to change. In fact, she changed a lot. At the time, I didn't understand that my mother had to very quickly travel the journey her son had taken years to walk. I know now that she couldn't change overnight—it took time. Today she is my strength and my

“The school board battled the Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) like they were waging war.”

most avid supporter, and I know she loves me no matter what. I can only forgive her for the things she once did and said.

That old country church, however, hasn't changed. Three years after graduating from high school and seven years after coming out and leaving the church, I made my way back. I sat through the service, hoping and praying I wouldn't hear those familiar strains of hate and condemnation; my hopes were dashed.

I spoke to the pastor about his bigotry after the congregants left. He said he had never preached what I know I remember—his words are eternally imprinted on my memory. Yet he then immediately went on to compare me to a contagious disease, saying children had to be protected from those who would “influence them.” By saying these awful things yet again, he again made me feel the way he did when I was a kid.

“I know that I’ve had an effect on my family and friends, my high school and college, and so many others.”

I have God to thank for making it through those times. In the very moments I thought about ending it all, or the times I thought about forsaking God and saying, “Enough already,” He somehow had a way of pulling me back.

But all that I was taught as a child wasn't in vain. My life has proven that when there is nothing else, God will be there. Ever since becoming that huge flame of pride at the end of my eighth-grade year, I've sought only to create a world in which gay people can experience the full love of God. It saddens me to know that all my work has fallen on deaf ears at my old Baptist church. At the same time, I know that I've had an effect on my family and friends, my high school and college, and so many others across the Carolinas.

Maybe one day, the picture-perfect, happy-go-lucky gays we see on MTV and on Logo, the gay-and-lesbian TV channel, will have a chance to exist everywhere. Perhaps rural America and the South will one day wise up. But until then, we all have more work to do.