

Gay & Lesbian Mormons: Interviews with James Kent, Former Executive Director of Affirmation, and with Aaron Cloward, Founder and Coordinator of Gay LDS Youth

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IN 1977 A GROUP OF PEOPLE with LDS backgrounds founded Affirmation, a national organization for gay and lesbian Mormons. Affirmation holds that same-sex relationships can be consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Many gay and lesbian Mormons find in Affirmation a safe place to discuss their homosexuality and to make friends.

Since its founding, Affirmation has become an increasingly visible presence. It has received the attention of the media in Utah and other states, and Affirmation leaders have expressed their views through letters to the editor and press releases. In 2000 the organization helped promote a petition to LDS leaders, urging them to reconsider the church's policies toward its gay and lesbian members. The petition was signed by a group of more than 300 people and published in The Salt Lake Tribune on December 23, 2000. In 2001 Affirmation organized vigils in memory of recent gay Mormon suicides.¹

Affirmation's website receives a monthly average of 3,800 visits from interested Internet users. The organization has also produced several brochures, such

1. See *Sunstone* 118 (April 2001): 90-91 and 119 (July 2001): 3, 5.

as *"Homosexuality & Scripture from a Latter-day Saint Perspective,"* and publishes a monthly newsletter, *Affinity*.

During the year 2000 James Kent served as Affirmation's executive director, defining annual goals, promoting the formation of new chapters, and overseeing the general activities of the organization. James, who resides in Hawaii, is currently serving as senior assistant director. On June 11, 2000, I interviewed him in my home in Salt Lake City.²

WHAT IS AFFIRMATION?

Affirmation, Gay & Lesbian Mormons, is a social support group for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people. Its purpose is to provide them with a safe space to sort out their sexual, religious, and spiritual issues without judgment.

SO THE MAIN FOCUS OF THE ORGANIZATION WOULD BE MUTUAL SUPPORT OR SOCIAL INTERACTION?

There are various things that Affirmation does. For some people, it helps them "come out of the closet." Affirmation also helps people who have simply walked away from their church but still feel some cultural or social connection with it. It's very easy to turn your back on a religion, but it's still inside of you, and sometimes there is a need to feel a sense of connection even though you are no longer actively involved with the church.

HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED WITH AFFIRMATION?

In May 1988, I was living in the San Francisco Bay Area. I was 30 years old and still pretending to be straight. A heterosexual friend of mine, who also had an LDS background, called me one day and said, "I don't want to insult you, but I think you would find it interesting that in San Francisco there is a gay Mormon organization." My straight friend and I went to the Metropolitan Community Church in San Francisco where the San Francisco chapter of Affirmation met. I can still remember walking up those stairs, opening the door, and seeing 31 gay and lesbian people with LDS backgrounds. I discovered for the first time in my life that I was not alone—that there were other people like me. And although my friend did not come back, I went there week after week as I began my journey out of the closet.

2. For more information on Affirmation and its mission, visit its website at www.affirmation.org.

YOU WERE ACTIVE IN THE CHURCH AT THAT TIME?

I was very active in the church at that time. I was living and going to church in Fremont, and I also attended a young adult ward in the south San Francisco Peninsula. When I came out, I immediately had my records transferred to the San Francisco Singles Ward where the bishop at the time was very gay-friendly. So there was a situation where I found a gay-friendly ward in addition to finding Affirmation.

ARE YOU A CONVERT? HOW HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE BEEN IN THE LDS CHURCH?

My grandparents where baptized off the coast of Maui in 1920, so I consider myself a third-generation Latter-day Saint. I have held many church callings, sometimes two or three church callings, attempting to be "the best boy in the world." I served an honorable two-year mission to Japan. I reasoned that if I did all these things, perhaps God would forgive me for having these "unnatural" desires for other men instead of for women. At the time I found Affirmation, I was very lucky because I was extremely depressed. I was going to church in an attempt to date a Relief Society woman, only to get a crush on a member of the elders quorum. It was becoming increasingly more difficult to make things fit because I felt more isolated and alone with each passing year.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR COMING-OUT PROCESS?

I probably could not have survived the coming-out process if it had not been for Affirmation. I was so involved with the church at the time, and I was so full of misinformation given to me by both the LDS church and the media. They both talked about effeminate men, men who wore dresses, men who molested children, men who wore only leather, promiscuous men who had sex in parks, restrooms, and bathhouses, men who hated God and had no moral values. I could very easily say, "Well, I cannot be homosexual because these traits are not me." I knew in my heart that I was still attracted to men, but used this line of reasoning as a form of denial.

Some might say that I am gay because my parents were divorced and I did not have a male role model to guide me. For many years, as another form of denial, I used the argument that my homosexual feelings were really an attempt to reconcile myself to my absent father. Finally, I realized this argument is ridiculous because it would suggest that my siblings are also lesbian or gay, which they are not. My life has always been full of male role models: uncles, teachers, scoutmasters, church leaders, and co-workers who mentored me.

HOW BIG IS AFFIRMATION?

The average membership of Affirmation is about 300. The number has remained the same over the years because the primary purpose of the organization is to help people come out and to help people maintain a spiritual and cultural connection with the church. Once those needs are met, the vast majority of Affirmation's members move on to other things. But there's a small core of us who stay behind to help the next group of people coming through and coming out, and then the next group of people. For me, it's an opportunity to give back to the organization that saved my life, to help other people out of the closet, to help them make the decisions that are best for them. A few of them even wind up getting married to members of the opposite sex. It is their choice. But it gives me great satisfaction to help people on their journey.

DOES THAT MEAN THAT AFFIRMATION ALSO HELPS
PEOPLE WHO ARE JUST QUESTIONING THEIR ORIENTATION,
OR WHO EVENTUALLY DECIDE TO "GO BACK INTO THE CLOSET"?

You ask a loaded question. I'm a firm believer that a person could be heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual. Or a person could be confused about his or her sexuality. There is a whole range of possibilities. What I regret is the societal pressure and particularly the church pressure to get married and have children. It is easy to gain applause and respect from church members and co-workers by getting married, having children, and going back into the closet, but that comes at the cost of your self-esteem and self-respect.

WHERE IS AFFIRMATION ESTABLISHED?

Currently Affirmation has about 10 chapters throughout the United States and then probably another twenty to thirty area contacts both in the United States and in other countries like Australia, Sweden, and Great Britain. We are organized both on a local and national level. The biggest event occurs when we gather once a year for a national conference. Affirmation chapters are largest, of course, where there are a lot of people with LDS backgrounds. So you'll find chapters in places like San Francisco, Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, Phoenix, and Las Vegas.

WHAT'S THE INTERNATIONAL PRESENCE OF THE ORGANIZATION?

We are slowly but surely becoming known overseas by getting our publications translated into different languages, particularly into Spanish. We have a lot of inquiries from people who come from Spanish-speaking countries. For now the vast majority of the people on our mailing list lives within the continental United States.

IT SEEMS TO ME THAT MANY GAY AND LESBIAN MORMONS FEEL
THAT LDS TEACHINGS ON CHASTITY DON'T APPLY TO THEM.
WOULD YOU AGREE WITH THAT STATEMENT?

Affirmation takes no moral stand on the law of chastity. That is a private matter. Some people within the organization have chosen celibacy. Some have chosen to become partnered and are monogamous. There are some people within the organization who are quite promiscuous. But as an organization we make no judgments on that. That's a matter between those persons, their sexual partners, and God, and we just leave it at that.

WHAT'S YOUR CURRENT LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT WITH THE INSTITUTIONAL
CHURCH? HAVE YOU BEEN DISFELLOWSHIPED OR EXCOMMUNICATED?

For the last 12 years I have been pretty much inactive—I have very, very little contact with the LDS church although I support my mother by going to church with her sometimes. As I started to see gay friends whom I loved very much die of AIDS (some as a form of suicide) or be excommunicated for having same-sex relations, I felt the LDS church was playing the role of God. I finally came to the conclusion that if the LDS church was too good for them, it was also too good for me. So two years ago, I requested to have my name removed from the records. I still consider myself spiritually, culturally, and socially LDS, but I cannot support the current leaders of the church on administrative or political levels.

DO YOU ATTEND ANY OTHER CHURCH?

Sometimes I attend non-LDS church services, but I have not formally joined any church. The Mormon church has played such a major part in my life. I don't know that I will ever be able to embrace any other religion as fully as I once did the LDS church.

DOES AFFIRMATION SEE ITSELF AS ANTAGONISTIC TOWARD THE LDS CHURCH?

There are many members of Affirmation who have been publicly humiliated by the LDS church, who have been shunned by members of the LDS church, who have been treated unfairly, and who are very angry at what happened to them and feel betrayed. They feel they sacrificed a great deal for a church that promised answers to all of their questions and then failed them. So there is an element within Affirmation that needs to vent, and I feel that Affirmation provides a safe space for that.

But there are also people within Affirmation who are very active, who are trying to live the gospel to the best of their abilities, and who firmly believe in all the teachings—except that they have to reconcile their church's teachings on homosexuality with who and what they are.

Affirmation, I would guess, is about one-third active members of the church, one-third inactive, and about a third have been disfellowshipped, excommunicated, or have asked to have their names removed from the records.

MANY MORMONS WOULD ASSERT THAT YOU HAVE "APOSTATIZED"
OR AT LEAST LOST THE SPIRIT. HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO SUCH ACCUSATIONS?

It is very easy to just brush people off and say that they are apostates. Each individual member of the church has his or her own brand of Mormonism. The question is—how much do we have to agree in order to be Mormon? How Mormon is Mormon? How far can you go away from the teachings of the church and still be considered a Mormon? And how far away do you have to go to be considered an apostate? Ultimately the term "apostate" would reflect the decision of a church court, and if such a court has decided that you have apostatized, then church leaders can take disciplinary actions if they want to. But such actions don't change the heart and soul of a person.

It is really sad that a lot of people who have been excommunicated buy into this apostasy rhetoric, and as a result they believe that God hates them or that God has abandoned them. I feel that my spiritual journey really began when I came out of the closet. I'm a firm believer that the relationship between an individual and God does not require a church. It should never require a church. A prophet can speak to 10 million members of the church, but the Lord can give anyone personal revelation in regard to his or her own life and how to live it. If people accuse me of having lost the Spirit or having apostatized—that's really their problem because I know that God loves me unconditionally. Everyone *should* know that God's love is unconditional.

DON'T YOU BELIEVE GAYS AND LESBIANS CAN CHANGE THEIR SAME-SEX BEHAVIOR?

I'm a firm believer that a gay man or a lesbian woman can live a heterosexual lifestyle, but that such a person is in self-denial. If you truly are gay or lesbian and you pretend to be heterosexual, then you are living a lie—a lie that you will have to deal with for the rest of your life. Now, I do know people who are bisexual enough to comfortably live a heterosexual lifestyle. And I know from personal experience of hundreds and hundreds of men from LDS backgrounds who did get married, did have children, and then five, ten, twenty, or thirty years later they found themselves coming out of the closet for the sake of their own sanity and survival. Finally they had to deal with who and what they are rather than continue pretending to be something they are not.

DO YOU FIND HIGH LEVELS OF HOMOPHOBIA IN THE LDS CHURCH?

The LDS church is among the most homophobic of Christian denominations today. The church membership is led to believe that everyone is born heterosexual and that homosexual activity is merely a confusion or perversion of one's sexuality. Given that premise, one can understand the condemnation. If you really were a heterosexual person and were engaging in homosexual sex, that would be as unnatural as a homosexual person engaging in heterosexual sex.

RECENTLY WE'VE HEARD OF SEVERAL GAY MORMONS WHO COMMITTED SUICIDE, AND ONE OF THE CASES RECEIVED ATTENTION FROM THE NATIONAL MEDIA.³ DO YOU THINK IT IS FAIR TO BLAME THE MORMON CHURCH FOR SUCH DEATHS?

That is a complicated question. There could be many factors behind a suicide—depression, the home situation, a career. However, when gay people are raised in an environment where they are taught that they are evil, wicked, degenerate, and selfish, they grow up with all this information and learn to hate themselves. They learn to treat their bodies as the enemy. They have very low self-esteem. And under these pressures some take their lives. I don't hold the LDS church solely responsible, but I do hold the church partially responsible for the deaths of Stuart Matis, D. J. Thompson, and others. Given the circumstances, how could it be otherwise?

DO YOU THINK THE CHURCH WILL EVER CHANGE ITS VIEWS ON HOMOSEXUALITY?

I don't expect the church to change its views in my lifetime. Perhaps sometime down the road there may be a change, but I'm not going to hold my breath. I'm going to continue living my life the best way I can and helping people out of the closet so that they can live their lives the best way they can. Let the church do what it deems best. If the church leaders do something very homophobic, I firmly believe they should be held to account. If, on the other hand, they undertake something positive, that should be acknowledged.

WHAT KIND OF DIALOGUE WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE
BETWEEN AFFIRMATION AND THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH?

This is a very difficult question. I personally have no desire for dialogue because I feel that LDS leaders are so set in their attitude towards homosexuality—as well as a variety of others topics such as feminism

3. See *Newsweek* 8 May 2000: 38-39.

and intellectualism—that discussion would be a waste of time. The church leaders routinely imply that they have the answers to everything and that they never make a mistake. I'm hoping that over the years enough parents, brothers, sisters, and friends will stand up and say to the church, "What you are telling me about homosexuality just does not add up to what my mother, my sister, my son is. This has to stop." Eventually the leaders' attitude toward homosexuality would change if enough church members stood up to general authorities to get them down on their knees, asking for additional revelation, rather than simply assuming they know the answer.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR ADVICE FOR YOUNG MORMONS
WHO MIGHT BE QUESTIONING THEIR SEXUAL ORIENTATION?

Whether you are straight or gay, I believe in the church's teaching that you are better off being celibate until you're old enough to sort through these issues and make mature decisions. You should date and get to know the person, let the relationship take its time, allow time to test and enjoy being together before you go on to a committed relationship.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR MESSAGE TO FAMILIES
WHO HAVE A GAY CHILD, SIBLING, OR PARENT?

You need to love your family member, unconditionally, as is: fat, warts, imperfections, everything! You don't have to agree with, but you do have to love him or her, and to find ways to express that love. I realize this is very, very difficult for some people. It would be nice if we could just come out to Mom and Dad and have them hug us and say, "Don't worry, we love you." But the fact is they have to deal first with the loss of a child they had thought was heterosexual, a child they thought was going to get married and have kids. Just as we did, they have to go through a grieving process and then a kind of re-birthing. We had wanted the same things, only to realize that we were different, that our lives are going to be different. Sometimes this process is very short, but sometimes it takes an entire life.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD?

I think the most important thing about this entire process is that in spite of everything I have said in this interview, I admit to you that I could be wrong, and I think that's O.K. And if I should change my mind, that's O.K., too. This is so important to me. I fear the person who says, "I have all the answers. I don't need to question anymore, and my answers regarding your life are better than your answers." My life is full of ques-

tions. I'm not afraid to admit that I make mistakes. I'd rather live by my own light and admit my shortcomings than live out someone else's expectations and pretend to be perfect.

A RECENT DEVELOPMENT among gay and lesbian Mormons is the emergence of groups exclusively for youth. These groups are formed by young Mormons who typically meet for social purposes and also interact with each other via the Internet. One such group has recently been launched in Salt Lake City, and another has just been announced in Seattle.

The Salt Lake City group, called Gay LDS Youth, aims to meet the social needs of gay Mormons ages 18 to 30. The group, which has a website and a mailing list reaching 270 subscribers, was created last March by Aaron Cloward, a returned missionary living and working in Salt Lake City. On August 21, 2001, I interviewed Aaron in Salt Lake City.⁴

WHY DID YOU CREATE GAY LDS YOUTH?

We created the group because of a lack of activities for young adults age 18 to 30. There is a lack of things for gay youth to do—outside of chat-rooms, the bars, and the clubs—that have a more social atmosphere where people can meet each other.

HOW OFTEN DOES THE GROUP MEET?

We meet weekly, usually on Saturdays. We try to have meetings during the week, too, because there are a few people who can't meet on Saturdays, so every once in a while we hold an activity on Wednesday.

WHAT IS YOUR AVERAGE ATTENDANCE?

It varies a lot. Lately we've had between 15 and 25 people, but at our last activity we had 35. It's getting bigger every time.

DO YOU HAVE A MAILING LIST?

We do. People can go to the website and fill out a form to request e-mail updates every week. Right now we have over 270 subscribers on the email list.

DOES THE GROUP INCLUDE WOMEN?

It does. We welcome anybody who wants to attend—gay, lesbian, transgendered, everybody. We only had one young lesbian girl write in and

4. For more information on Gay LDS Youth, visit its website at www.gaylds youth.com.

ask if she would be welcome, and we said, "Absolutely—and you can bring your girlfriend if you want." And over the last few months we had about four or five straight girls who have come with their friends to hang out with us. So everyone is welcome.

WHAT PERCENTAGE OF THE GROUP DO YOU
ESTIMATE IS ACTIVE IN THE LDS CHURCH?

That's a very good question. I'd say probably around 30 to 40 percent still attend church occasionally.

DO YOU ATTEND CHURCH?

I don't—I'm not active in the church, though I would like to be. I just moved and I don't have any friends to go to church with. But it would be fun to go.

DO YOU THINK THE LDS CHURCH AND THE SEMINARY
PROGRAM ARE SAFE PLACES FOR GAY LDS YOUTH?

I have several friends who are out and still go to church events. For the most part, they are treated well by their peers in ward meetings or church functions. But if they are not out, or if they're questioning, it's really difficult because they hear lessons about homosexuality and other issues and sometimes things are said that can be hurtful. The teachers and the people who run the meetings are always very careful. But sometimes people in the class bring up a point that can be hurtful.

HAVE YOU BEEN OUT TO YOUR PREVIOUS BISHOPS?

I was out to my bishop in St. George and he was absolutely wonderful. I had a calling as the president of the LDS fraternity down there. So it was somewhat similar to our gay youth group here—it was really fun. We would go out with all these young guys and have activities. I was out to my bishop and to the stake president, and they were very nice. They didn't say anything—mostly because I believe they didn't know what to say. Definitely they made it clear that I was supposed to keep LDS standards, but they didn't really say much. They said, "Keep doing what you're doing; you're doing good with the fraternity, so keep going."

WERE YOU OUT TO THE MEMBERS OF THE FRATERNITY?

No, I wasn't—just to the bishop and the stake president.

DOES THE GAY LDS YOUTH GROUP HAVE
STANDARDS SUCH AS NO DRINKING OR NO SMOKING?

Yes, we do. If somebody drinks or smokes, they are welcome to attend, but not to do these things in our meetings. One of the main points of the Gay LDS Youth group is to be able to have a place where people can go and not get involved with alcohol, tobacco, and things like that. After we started this group, a lot of my friends were very happy about that. They said, "It's so nice to meet somebody and they are not drunk, or they are not high on drugs, and to be able to socialize in a setting like that." So yes—we do have those standards.

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE BIGGEST PROBLEM THAT GAY LDS YOUTH FACES?

Right now, from what I've experienced with some of my friends and the people I've talked to, I would say acceptance. A lot of gay LDS youth I know want to find a same-sex partner, but have a difficult time finding somebody who fits the standards they've grown up with. They want to find somebody who still has spirituality, morals, and values. So many of my friends and people I have known tend to throw away all the morals and values that they've grown up with. They think, "I'm gay, I'm going to throw it all away. I may as well live the way everybody else is living." This is hard for me. I think it's sad because I think that gay LDS youth can find friends and potential partners who have the same spirituality and the same things that they want.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE CHURCH'S VIEWS ON CHASTITY?

My personal belief is that any kind of sexual relations with another person, whether male or female, are fine as long as they are in a committed relationship. That is my personal belief. As far as the youth group goes, we welcome anybody no matter what their goals in life are. If somebody wants to be chaste and stay active in the church and have gay friends, we welcome them. If somebody says "No, I don't want to be active in church and I want to sleep around," we welcome them, too. We want everyone to feel welcome in the group.

DO YOU NETWORK WITH OTHER GROUPS, SUCH AS THE
YOUTH GROUP THAT MEETS AT THE UTAH GAY AND LESBIAN CENTER?

We're starting to. One thing we want to be really careful with, though, is being affiliated with them. Sometimes it's very easy to get affiliated with a political group, or a pro-gay rights group, or a group that supports gay marriage. And for an LDS person, it's really scary to be involved with those groups because if you're affiliated with a group that doesn't support LDS teachings, you can have church disciplinary action

taken against you. So one of the things we're really careful to do is to network with these other groups, but not to be officially affiliated with them so that youth can know that they won't get into trouble for attending our meetings.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST SUCCESSFUL ACTIVITY YOU'VE HAD SO FAR?

We had a couple of very successful activities. At the very beginning we had a party in Heber City. One of the guys on our list has a hard time getting to Salt Lake City, so he volunteered his place to have a party. We went up there; we had about 25 guys. There was a pool, we went swimming, we watched movies, we stayed up all night long just talking, having fun, and eating. It was really great. Then the next morning we went to have breakfast. And then recently we had another pool party at a friend's house. We had about 35 people. It's turned out so well. People had a really good time.

DOES THE GROUP ENCOUNTER OPPOSITION FROM PARENTS OR CHURCH LEADERS?

So far, no. We did have opposition in the beginning—a parent wrote in and said she saw her son looking at our website. So she looked it up after he left, and she was disappointed because she had thought it was a group trying to change her son's orientation. That's one thing we're not about. If there are people in the group who want to change their orientation, that's fine. We welcome them and support them in whatever goals they have. We don't really promote any philosophy. We just provide a place where guys can relax and have fun with people who are going through the same things they are.

I RECENTLY READ AN ARTICLE IN A LOCAL GAY PUBLICATION ABOUT GAY AND LESBIAN YOUTH WHO ARE HOMELESS (*PILLAR*, AUGUST 2001, PP. 7-9).

DO YOU KNOW OF ANY GAY LDS YOUTH BEING KICKED OUT OF THEIR HOMES?

Yes, I do. In fact, two of the people in that article are on our mailing list. One is about 16 years old, and he has a hard time getting a chance to get away and come to the activities. The other one is a returned missionary, about 22, and he was kicked out of his home in California.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR ADVICE TO LDS YOUTH WHO FEEL LONELY?

To come hang out with us! That would be my best advice because we're here for everybody—whatever level they're on. If they want to stay active in church, that's fine. If they don't, that's fine, too. And we have quite a mix in the members of the group, people who have different ideas about what they want to do, and that's one thing that I think makes

the group so successful—its diversity. So my biggest advice for them would be to come hang out with us.

And if there's no way they can get to our meetings, or if they're not out, if they don't dare, or are scared, I would advise them to find somebody they can talk with. They can have a support system with people who can understand what they're going through. In our group we have a directory listing so that people can email each other.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR ADVICE TO PARENTS WHO
FIND OUT THAT THEIR CHILD IS GAY OR LESBIAN?

That's a very tough question. My favorite answer is—listen to your children. I think a lot of times parents find out that their children are gay or lesbian and they react. Sometimes the reaction is very negative, and I don't think they take the time to listen to what their child is going through. If they took the time to listen, to try to understand what's going on in their child's heart and what their child is feeling, the parents would be a lot more sensitive to the issue, and we wouldn't have problems like people kicking their children out.

IF YOU HAD A CHANCE TO SAY SOMETHING TO AN
LDS BISHOP OR SEMINARY TEACHER, WHAT WOULD THAT BE?

To be accepting. I understand that a church leader or a seminary teacher has the responsibility to support the teachings of the church. And I think that's important. It is fine that they do that and fulfill their role in representing the church and in saying what the church believes about homosexuality. But ultimately if the person decides that they want to have a same-sex partner, or whatever they decide, it is important that the leaders be accepting of what the person decides to do, instead of forcing something that the person doesn't want. My advice to church leaders, not only in the LDS faith, but in all faiths, would be to listen and then to accept what the person decides because we all have our freedom of choice. And once that person makes the decision, to still love them and still support them, no matter what they decide and how they decide to live.

SHOULD A GAY LDS YOUTH GO ON A MISSION?

I think it depends on the person. I served a mission and I loved it. If I had to do it all over again, I would. At that time I wasn't out and I was coming to terms with myself. I think for some people, going on a mission wouldn't be a good idea. Maybe they're not ready, or they're not willing to keep the things that are required of them. For other people—yes, I would say it's fine, as long as they understand that there are certain rules

they'll have to keep and abide by. But my mission helped me more than anything else I've done in my life. It's helped me to become more outgoing and to develop leadership skills. If I hadn't served a mission, I probably wouldn't even have enough guts to do what I'm doing with the youth group.

IS THERE ANYTHING THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD?

I'd like to invite people to come out and hang out with us. We have 270 people on our e-mail list, and we want it to be 2,700! We'll keep finding places that are big enough to hold everyone. The more people we have who can support each other, the better community we'll have.