

the page

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Las Lomas High School

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Homosexuality at Las Lomas, past and present

Gay teens' experiences reflect social attitudes

by Joshua Kors

It was 12:35 AM on a warm Saturday morning, August 27, 1983, when, witnesses say, ex-Las Lomas student Bobby Griffith walked to a nearby freeway overpass after a night of dancing. Twenty years old, he climbed onto the railing, paused and back-flipped onto the pavement twenty feet below; he was hit by an oncoming 18 wheeler.

What drove Bobby, a "quiet, peaceful kind of person" in his mother's words, to commit suicide? Isolated both at school and at home, Bobby became dependent, unable to accept himself and his lifestyle. His mother, Mary Griffith, taped Bible passages to his mirror to remind him that he was evil and must change or go to hell. At school, he ate alone, afraid everyone could look at him and know his secret.

Bobby Griffith was gay.

An orange candle burns, day and night, in the corner of the Griffith's living room next to Bobby's graduation picture and three gay pride buttons—"Boycott homophobia," "We love our gay and lesbian children," and "Stone-wall 25th Anniversary"—remembrances of Bobby's brief life and tragic death. Yet more than a decade later the lessons in Bobby's suicide have not fully been learned; still, 30% of all suicide victims are gay and lesbian youth, according to the Department of Health and Human Services.

Mary Griffith has learned an important lesson from her son's death. Instead of clinging to her Presbyterian faith and anti-homosexual beliefs, Griffith re-evaluated both her religion and her actions, which she now feels pushed Bobby to desperation. Once an ardent opponent of homosexuality, Griffith now sounds one of the strongest voices on the march for gay rights. Griffith, who spoke about Bobby's death on *20/20* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and founded the Walnut Creek chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians And Gays (PFLAG), a support group for gay teens and their parents, hopes sharing Bobby's story will pre-

Bobby Griffith



1963-1983

'Thou shalt not lie down with mankind as with womankind. It is abomination.' (Leviticus 18:22)

vent another needless suicide.

Bobby's Story

Bobby Griffith, born into a loving, devoutly-Christian family on June 24, 1963, felt happy and confident early in high school, participating on the track and swim teams and writing stories in his spare time. "He was a very outgoing person until he discovered about his gayness. Then he became very quiet—kept to himself a lot," Mary Griffith said. "That's understandable when there

was really no other student he knew he could identify with...So he pretty much spent his lunch hours and breaks reading and writing. I guess he thought everyone could look at him and see that he was gay."

Brought up to believe that homosexuality was evil, Bobby felt constantly guilty and afraid to come out, confiding only in his older brother Ed and former counseling secretary Grace Lewis. "I didn't know this until quite a while after Bobby's suicide, but [Lewis] said he was very lonesome, and she could see that he was in a lot of pain....At school

they would make fun of him because they could tell he was different," Griffith said.

Although growing increasingly depressed, Bobby still tried to maintain appearances, attending church regularly. "I think that must have been really uncomfortable, knowing how the church felt. But he kept going. For Bobby, it was quite a conflict—he couldn't understand why just the fact that he was gay made him a bad person because basically he was a good person. He couldn't figure that out," Griffith said.

The pressure of harboring his painful secret—exacerbated by school and church—finally broke Bobby down, and his senior year he made a half-hearted suicide attempt, trying to overdose on aspirin. That night as he slept, sedated by the aspirin, his brother divulged his secret to their parents.

The news shook the family. "My only concern was that he was going to go to Hell if he didn't repent, if God didn't cure him," Griffith said, describing her reaction. "I thought I was going to Hell [if Bobby didn't repent]."

Griffith enrolled her son in religious counseling at Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church, where the counselor tried to change him to a heterosexual. "Bobby prayed and really thought God would answer his prayers. We all prayed when we went to church. Bobby really believed that God was going to cure him," said his mother.

But religious counseling could not change Bobby. When he turned 18, Bobby, ashamed, began exploring the gay community—going on dates and

to believe that...and so was I."

Lonesome and discouraged, Bobby dropped out of Las Lomas two months before graduation. "He just didn't want



Bobby, seen here with his family at the beach, felt happy as a child. "He was a very outgoing person until he discovered about his gayness," said his mother (courtesy photo).

to have to deal with [Las Lomas] anymore because he was constantly afraid that someone would know about him being gay. The way he put it [was], "There's not anything there for me." Then he contradicted that and said, "No, there's just very little of me there."

In February 1983, Bobby escaped to Oregon where he lived with his gay cousin, Janette, and worked in a convalescent home as a nurse's aide. Going to gay bars with boyfriends, he could not shake off his guilty conscience. Six

because I was still—we were still hoping that Bobby would change—that God would come to his rescue....I would constantly say, "Bobby, you can change if you want to.That's a horrible thing to do to a child.... I just thought he wasn't trying hard enough," Griffith said.

Now, 12 years after Bobby's death, the question remains: Could it happen all over again? Or have the times really changed?

Las Lomas Homosexuals Speak Out

Sarah (not her real name)

"I'm not going to worry about the 'jocks.' ...They're not [important] in my life. And if they [create] a hostile environment, I don't notice it," exclaimed Sarah, always the cool, confident bisexual. But with pink curly hair and pointy Dame Edna glasses, it's hard not to notice Sarah, a self-proclaimed "hard-core feminist." Her shocking appearance and assertive demeanor provide a stark contrast to those of diffident Bobby.

Yet, like Bobby, Sarah has traveled a bumpy road to happiness and self-acceptance. Growing up, Sarah thought "it was just a part of being straight—being turned on by girls, by women. And then as I got older I started realizing that I was having emotional feelings towards other women." Then, in eighth grade at Foothill Middle School, a throng of classmates, slinging sexual insults, accosted her and her bisexual friends. "They made me realize that I was gay, and that I had to come out and be happy with myself—that I couldn't let other people silence

me and keep me down," she stated.

Sarah has since come out to her parents, who accept her yet feel uneasy about her sexuality. "I don't want to say that they don't accept it because they do accept it. I just don't think that they're 100% comfortable having

someone this close...being in that situation. There was a time when my mother even said that the idea of two women together grossed her out," Sarah said.

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Pacific Center

1250 Pine St., Walnut Creek

939-7711

2. Bay Area Network of Gay and Lesbian Educators

1. Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays

Other Gay Sensitive Educators:

having sex. "He says, 'I guess I've chosen sin over righteousness.' He said, 'What really bothers me is the fear of going to Hell and the fear that [I'm] following Satan instead of God,'" Griffith explained. "He was brought up

months later he returned home to visit his family; it was the last time they would see him alive. "He looked like he had given up—like he was just going through the motions," his mother said. "Bobby just became very discouraged

Homosexuality:

(continued from p. 13)

"It was [hurtful] for a little while, but I have to accept that, and I can't let it bug me. She's being honest with me."

Feeling isolated, Sarah turned to the Pacific Center, a gay teen support group in downtown Walnut Creek. "I felt the need to know that there were other people [like] me," she said. "[At Pacific Center] I could talk about things in an environment where I wouldn't have people objecting to everything I said because they didn't accept me."

After a few months at the Pacific Center, Sarah, once an ardent supporter of gay pride, has abandoned gay activism and now feels comfortable with herself and her sexuality. "Afterwards, I ended up hating the [Pacific Center] because I didn't need that anymore because I stopped believing in gay pride. Gay pride makes gays stand out as different—'Wow! Look at me! I'm different!' But I'm not different from anyone because I'm gay," she said. "People really do pick-up on the way you treat yourself...If you give yourself [a positive image], other people are going to pick up on that and treat you positively."

Self-accepting and open, she appeared on *Straight Talk 'n' Teens*, a local television show which aired a segment about homosexuality earlier this year. "We talked about some good issues, and I was really surprised by the acceptance of the audience. I totally thought it would be ignorant, and we only heard one negative thing," she commented.

But Sarah acknowledges the diffi-

culty of coming out and the importance of being ready. "What's most important is who you're in the closet to. Are you in the closet to yourself, to your parents, to your friends, to the world?" she questioned. "And who's going to stick by you? I think the first thing is coming out to yourself, and as soon as you come out to yourself—as soon as you're confident of yourself—you can deal with things."

Damian Sessions

"I've grown tremendously since I was a freshman—mentally, emotionally, and physically," bragged junior Damian Sessions, patting his ever growing gut. Indeed the six foot junior varsity volleyball center with long flaming red hair has been through an emotionally difficult period since his freshman year, when he realized that he was bisexual.

After playing a cruel prank on his ex-girlfriend, telling her that she made him realize that he was gay, Damian began to realize that his feelings for a male friend went beyond friendship. "I was like, 'Well, do I really have feelings for him? I think I might,'" he said. "I was scared. I was confused. I was frantic at one point....It took me about a month and a half of soul-searching and just looking and asking and thinking about it. Finally, I came to the decision that yes, it is acceptable, and yes, I am bi."

Damian, too, has received the support of his parents. "My mom's cool with it. She thinks it might be a phase, but she's willing to entertain the notion that it's not....[But] I know I am because I've had deep crushes on several different guys," he said, although he admits his dating life has been just as bad with the guys as it has been with the ladies. "It's a very real thing. I don't do it just because it's cool or it's in style. It's just who I am," he continued.

Damian's comment acknowledges a salient difference between socially accepted behavior nowadays and that of 12 years ago. When Bobby attended Las Lomas, the "invisible kids," as Mary Griffith describes them, were enigmas—isolated and unaccepted. Yet today homosexuals are increasingly out in the open and, in some respects, en vogue—admired for being "alternative."

As one student told Damian, reflecting the new degree social acceptance for homosexuality: "I honestly don't have a problem with them unless they hit on me or something, ya know? But if they start thinking I'm going to have sex with them, then they're crossing the line right there because I'm personally not into that kind of s—."

"Well," responded Damian, "it's fine by me, but it's a little bit of an ignorant comment....Acceptance [at Las Lomas] is adequate but not optimum."

If you would like to know more about the Griffiths, read *Prayers for Bobby* (due out in June) by Leroy Aarons, for which Sarah was interviewed.

Not another condom column

by Aljarice Sanders

With the recent death of one of the hip hop world's most notorious gangster rappers, Eazy-E, the youth of today has had yet another wake up call about the AIDS virus. I know what you're going to say: not another article about using condoms and having safe sex. But let's face it; it is us against the virus and right now the virus seems to be winning. But who wants to hear that? After all, we are the generation that is untouchable. Death, earthquakes, floods, crime, drugs, and a whole new slew of STDs won't hurt us or even come near us. After all they (the STDs) have nothing on us. Or do they? That little incident with Eazy-E was his fault. Eazy-E had it coming, plus he wasn't exactly from our generation. Right?

Well, think what you want, but I refuse to let STDs even come near me. I mean, to hell with safe sex. I'm taking the safest route around: no sex. At least with my foolproof, no-sex method I know the condom can't break or the diaphragm won't leak, and I know

I won't be in that small percentage for whom the contraceptive doesn't work at all. It may be kind of hard to remain abstinent with images of sex everywhere I go, but I'll just keep telling myself that I don't want to become another teenager who has to get an abortion or drop out of sight for about nine months. I'll tell myself I don't want to be a death statistic. I think that these thoughts alone are more than enough incentive not to have sex.

But I'm not going to preach because as I said before) this is not going to be another "wear a condom" article. We are almost adults so you'd think that we would know how to make our own decisions by now. After years of hearing adults telling us about sex and what we should and should not do when considering having sex, it would only be natural to think that we know how to handle the situation. So I will end the article by saying this: If you want to have sex without a condom by all means go right ahead. But just remember what happened to Eazy-E. Because as we all know, what can happen to somebody else can just as easily happen to you. And that's the truth.