



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Brad Hoylman-Sigal

NY Daily News: Sexual orientation conversion therapy victims speak out at hearing for banning the practice on minors

BRAD HOYLMAN-SIGAL May 16, 2014

By Corinne Lestch, Thursday, May 15, 2014

Mathew Shurka, sent to orientation conversion therapy after coming out as gay to his Dad at age 16, recounted the depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts he experienced after his long string of so-called therapy sessions with several licensed mental health professionals.

When Mathew Shurka came out as gay at 16, his father thought he could be cured.

Shurka was sent to a sex orientation conversion therapist, who told him he would be straight in six weeks. The process involved cutting off contact with his mother and sisters to limit his interactions with women.

At a hearing Thursday, Shurka recounted the depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts he experienced after his long string of so-called therapy sessions with several licensed mental health professionals.

“Every time I slept with a woman, that was affirmation that the therapy was working,” said Shurka, 25. “But the anxiety I was experiencing was not sexy and not fun.”

Shurka was one of several victims of conversion therapy who spoke at the hearing convened by state Sen. Brad Hoylman (D-Manhattan), who is pushing to ban the practice on anyone under 18. California and New Jersey have already instituted such a ban.

If his legislation is enacted, mental health providers who perform the conversion therapy would be cited for unprofessional conduct and subject to licensing sanctions.

“This is an issue of abuse of kids as well as consumer fraud, where therapists are misleading parents into believing that they can ‘cure’ their kids,” said Hoylman, who is openly gay.

Mordechai Levovitz, 35, another witness who suffered through conversion therapy starting when he was 6, was ordered to play sports, speak in a lower tone of voice and never cross his legs. He said his parents became horrified when he began playing with Barbies and acting “too feminine.”

“Sending a minor to therapists who work on changing orientation is not right, it is not consensual, it is not an intervention,” said Levovitz. “It is simply using professional licensure to tell perfectly healthy youth that there is something wrong with them.”

Homosexuality was classified as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association until 1973.

Mental health providers and advocates of the proposed bill said that classification — though outdated and wrong — still contributes to the belief that conversion therapy can “fix” gay people.

“That has created stigma, prejudice, alienation,” said Dinelia Rosa, president of the New York State Psychological Association. “That’s why it’s so difficult for children and adolescents to accept their sexual orientation. There is nothing to treat or change.”

The bill, which has 16 co-sponsors so far, needs 32 votes in the Senate to pass. Currently, it has no Republican support.

Sen. Ruben Diaz (D-Bronx), an opponent of gay marriage, said politicians shouldn't interfere with health professionals' practices.

"It's not for us politicians to dictate to a professional doctor what kind of medicine he should be using or what kind of treatment he should use," Diaz said.