

Portrait of a Son's Suicide

Bill's Story

by Gabi Clayton (Bill's mother)

With editorial assistance and inspiration from my friend, Steve Schalchlin



Coming Out

Bill came out to us as bisexual when he was 14. He was afraid to tell us, because he knew that other kids had told their parents and that their parents had disowned them or reacted in other ways that were frightening. He had read the book I had loaned him "Changing Bodies, Changing Lives," and there were coming out stories in the book. Finally he worked up the courage to tell us and we assured him that we loved him and accepted him. He was so happy that he wanted to tell the whole world. We recommended a support group out at the college which I had just graduated from. Bill went to that group three times and stopped - he said he really liked it but that he was fine and didn't need to go any more.



The Kid I Knew and Loved

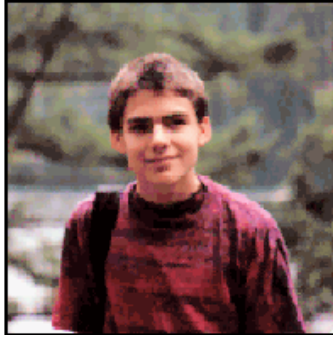
Bill was the child who came home from school the first week in first grade SO excited because his teacher had let him go to a special room! Turns out he finished a project early and decided to make animal noises to entertain the other children. As discipline he was sent to the coat room off the classroom. He enjoyed swinging on the closet bar so much that he wondered if the teacher would let him do it again the next day.

He was a gifted student who didn't always get the best of grades because he was always doing twenty things at the same time - and homework wasn't always on the top of the list. Shy? Well, he told me that he was shy, but it was really hard to tell. His friends always loved him - when he wasn't driving them crazy.

He wanted to be a sculptor, a teacher, an architect, a counselor...

An Assault

So, he told us he went to that support group three times, and we didn't question it. Over the next year he had a hard time in school, but seemed basically OK -- sometimes somewhat withdrawn or moody. We were worried, but thought it was just typical teen emotional ups and downs. We were wrong.



On the way to the third support group meeting, he had met a man from the group who was 20 years old and who told Bill he was a member of another support group for gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered youth. He talked Bill into getting off the bus to go to his house "to borrow a book". When they got there he made Bill have sex with him. Bill was only a 14 year old kid who didn't expect this, didn't know what to do, and he was unable to stop it. He came home that day and pretended he had gone to that meeting because he didn't want to admit to anyone - especially himself - what had happened. Ironically perhaps, at the time I was doing a graduate internship at a counseling center that specializes in sexual abuse.

Bill finally told Sam, his best friend. He told Sam that the memories of that sexual assault were overwhelming him and that he was suicidal. He asked Sam not to tell anyone, but Sam put the friendship on the line and told me, because he didn't want to lose his friend. Bill was relieved once we knew, and we reported it to the police and got Bill started with a therapist.

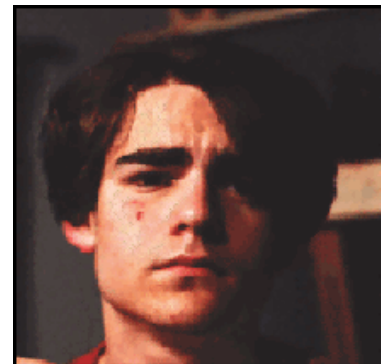
It took the police a long time to find the man. When they finally questioned him he confessed to exactly what Bill had said. Then he got a lawyer, plead not guilty at his arraignment, and managed to avoid jail and court until a month *after* Bill died. (He finally went to prison for 13 months.) So, Bill would see him around town -- which aggravated the post-traumatic stress he was in counseling for. There were times when Bill would suddenly take a nose dive into severe depression for no apparent reason. Later we would find out that it was because he had seen this man on the bus or at the movies. Bill was so depressed and suicidal at one point that he spent some time in the hospital.

He stayed in counseling, and finally was getting back to being his old, impish self again. His mental health improved tremendously. He had a summer job doing computer and office stuff, and he loved it. He started looking forward to school again (after two rough years), and he felt like he had a future. Yes, he was back! He and his counselor agreed that he was done with therapy, and she closed his case with Crime Victims Compensation -- on April 5th, 1995.

The Beginning of the End

The Activist Club at Olympia High School had invited Colonel Margarethe Cammermeyer to speak at a school assembly in honor of Women's History Month. (She is the highest ranking person to have challenged the military's ban of gays, and was the subject of the TV movie "Serving in Silence".)

Controversy erupted when a group of homophobic parents and community members - mostly people who object to homosexuality on "religious grounds" - found out that she had accepted the invitation and that the assembly was scheduled. We (supporters) found out that there was going to be a hullabaloo at the next school board meeting, and that these people were going to attend in large numbers to complain and ask the school board to cancel the assembly. Bill was out at school, and he was one of a group of kids who put up flyers about the assembly and promoted people attending the school board meeting to support the speech.



The day after the hate crime assault.

Catherine (our housemate and our kid's second mom) and I and Bill and many others attended. All in all there were about three hundred people there and the meeting lasted for about two and a half hours. I think there were a few more supporters than objectors who spoke - I was one of them. The school board decided to remain firm in their decision to let her speak, and she did -- on March 21, 1995. But the climate in the community was not good during this time. There were some awful, hateful letters to the editor in our daily newspaper, and in general a lot of anti-gay feelings were stirred up.

April 6, 1995

On April 6, 1995, Sam and his girlfriend, Jenny, were walking with Bill near their high school to Jenny's house to watch a video they had rented. Four guys -- one of whom knew Bill and Sam because he was in the same high school (and had gone to their middle school before that) -- followed them in a car and



The day after the hate crime assault.

yelled things I will not repeat related to sexual orientation. Bill and his friends ignored them and decided to walk through the high school campus, thinking it would be safer because the gate was closed. The four guys drove off, but they parked the car nearby, because the next thing Bill and his friends knew, they came up on foot and surrounded them. They said "You wanna fight?" Bill, Sam and Jenny tried to walk away -- they didn't want to fight at all.

The four then brutally assaulted Bill and Sam, kicking and beating them both into unconsciousness while Jenny screamed at them to stop. It was broad daylight during Spring break.

When they regained consciousness a minute after the attackers left; Bill, Sam and Jenny ran to the school custodian's office and called the police and then their families. They were taken to the emergency room where we met them. Bill had abrasions and bruises. They thought he might have kidney damage, but he didn't. Sam was a mess too, with a broken nose and many bruises.

While we were in the emergency room, one of the guys who did the assault came casually walking through with two other friends, to visit a friend who had just had a baby. Sam saw him and Sam's parents called the police. When they found him he confessed and told the police who the other guys were - they were all under 18 years old. The police treated it as a hate crime from the very beginning.

A Rally Against Hate

A lot of wonderful people in Olympia responded quickly and supported Bill (and us all) and held an incredible anti-hate crime rally on April 14th, a few days after the assault. Many people spoke there, including Colonel Cammermeyer, who returned to support the kids.

At the rally, Bill spoke from his heart. He said:

"In all likelihood, my friends Sam and Jenny will never have to tolerate this - or never have to endure this type of hate crime or any other type in their lives - and I hope that's true. But as an openly bisexual person in Olympia, I'm probably - or may be - the victim of this sort of thing again. Hate crimes - especially those against homosexuals and bisexuals and transgendered people are on the rise in this area. And that is why now - more than ever - we, the gay community need to come out and band together and fight for our civil rights and our right to be safe in our homes and on the streets. Thank you for coming."



Waiting to speak at the anti-hate rally.

I spoke to Bill - and to all the people who were there in Sylvester Park that day. I stood at the microphone (voice and hands shaking - I am not comfortable with making speeches) and I said:

"First of all I felt it was important as Bill's mom for me to stand up here and tell Bill how very much I love him and how incredibly proud I am of him. And I'm incredibly proud of him not just for the courage he's showing tonight and since this happened, but because of who he is as a person - and that means every bit of him including the fact that he is bisexual. I think it's important for parents to do that..."

"My father was a German Jewish refugee, and the hate he faced as a child in Germany is the same hate that my son and these kids faced on that street by that school. And hate doesn't grow in a vacuum. It can't grow unless we allow it to. It grows on fear and it grows on silence."

Alec (my husband and Bill's dad, who had always been the one of us who handled public speaking with more ease) stepped up to the microphone and said:

"I had a speech planned - but this outpouring of sympathy and support has got me all choked up. I can't talk - thank you for coming."

Alec was in tears as he left the podium.

Bill's older brother Noel was in college and was unable to come home until after the rally in Sylvester Park. But he sent this letter to the editor of the *Olympian* (our daily newspaper). It was published on April 22.



My name is Noel Clayton. On April 6 my brother, Bill, and his friends were assaulted at Olympia High School.

I just wanted to write to extend my thanks to a number of people whose support has been invaluable in this crisis.

Not least among these is The *Olympian* staff members who have treated the victims with dignity and respect despite those in the area who would like to silence or ignore gay-bashing as a problem.

I would like to thank the Olympia Police Department and the prosecutor's office who have worked hard and carefully to make sure that the boys who were responsible are brought to justice. Also I would like to thank the 200 to 300 people who showed up at the rally to support Bill and Sam, as well as those, like myself who were not able to make it but were there in spirit.

Finally I would like to remind everyone that this is not over. Our families will be dealing with the effects of this assault for years to come, if not for the rest of our lives.

I will never forget the events of these past weeks. I intend to fight, and I ask you all to join me, until no one has to walk the streets afraid, until no one has to live in fear of persecution or assault no matter what their race, religion or sexuality.

The Consequences of Hate

The physical wounds healed and we thought he was going to make it - he seemed to handle things really well until after the rally.

Then Bill crashed, saying he couldn't cope. The only place he felt safe was at home. One of the main places he didn't feel safe was at Olympia High School, where the attitude was that the police were handling what happened as an assault, so the only thing the school administrators did was to tell the one young man who assaulted Bill who went there (the other three went to high school in Rochester) was that he would "be in trouble if he even looked at Bill sideways."

It was too much. The assault sent him back into the place he had fought so hard to get out of. He became very depressed and suicidal, and agreed to go to the hospital again, saying, "Mom, you can't watch me twenty-four/seven." While he was in the hospital he heard that a friend of his was gay-bashed at school in a nearby town.

After about 10 days he came home. We and his doctors in the hospital thought he had gotten past being suicidal. But Bill took a massive overdose on May 8th. Alec found him unconscious on the kitchen floor and had him rushed to the hospital, but they couldn't save him.

He didn't leave a suicide note, but he had said to me before he was hospitalized after the rally that he was just tired of coping. It was the constant knowledge that at any time he could be attacked again simply because of who he was, that at any time his friends could be attacked for the same reason, that despite the love of his family and friends all he could see ahead was a lifetime of facing a world filled with hate and violence, going from one assault to another. He was 17 years old - an age when kids are supposed to be excited about moving out into the world as adults. The only place he felt safe was at home. He saw no hope, so he chose to end his life.

The memorial service we held for Bill was an incredible part of our healing process. It was a big job to put it all together. We felt it had to be something Bill would have wanted - and he had considered himself a pagan. We felt so strongly that he had to be respected in this last thing. It was an incredible ceremony - so many people helped, and so many friends and strangers came - we had let it be known that anyone in the community who wanted to come was invited. There was music and drumming and ceremony and people who wished to were given a chance to speak...

Everyone there had been asked to bring a candle, and was given a prayer stick (a small twig) to hold during the memorial and asked to think of good wishes for Bill. After the ceremony we stood at the door and lit each person's candle. Each person took their candle over to Sylvester Park (which was just across the street) in silent vigil, and there we collected the sticks. Later that night family and a few close friends took the baskets of sticks to the land behind Sam's house and placed each stick in a beautiful bonfire to release the wishes for Bill so that they would travel with him. It was wonderful. Not at all "traditional" - but then we have never been known for being that.

Pouring Salt into the Wound

Right after Bill died, a coroner talked to us -- and asked us if we would allow him to be an organ donor. We said yes, and she talked to us for a while and asked some questions . She already knew about the



One of Bill Clayton's last paintings which he made while hospitalized for depression after the hate crime.

"Hold Back the Dawn" is a song by Robbie Robertson

hate crime. When she indicated that there might be a problem and she would get back to us, we thought it was because of the overdose.

Then -- I can't remember how long later -- time was a mess those days, we got a call from her. Bill could not be an organ donor -- the Lions Eye Bank had turned down the donation because of his sexual orientation -- he was in a high risk group!!!! I couldn't believe it. I told the coroner how angry and upset this made me.

After that I received a letter from the Lions, explaining that they were "not able to honor the donation of tissue from any member of this at risk population because of the possibility of transmitting HIV to a recipient." and "Although Bill was probably HIV negative, the possibility does exist that he could have been exposed but would not test positive. I hope you understand that such a risk is too large for us to take."

And I wrote back on June 12, 1995:

It has taken me some time to respond to your letter. In it you explained that the Lions Eye Bank would not accept my son as a donor because he was openly bisexual, and therefore a member of a high risk population. It is somehow ironic that Bill had an eye operation when he was younger which was paid for by the Lions Club in Mississippi.

Bill committed suicide at age 17, after being assaulted in a hate crime because he was bisexual. Frankly, reading your rejection and justification was one of the most difficult things I have had to face since his death. In your words I saw what my son decided he could not face in the world every day - all the homophobia, hatred and fear of who he was as a person.

Just who is it that you believe is safe? Heterosexuals? Married persons? Children? In my work as a mental health therapist, I work with young children who are at risk of HIV from sexual abuse. WHO IS SAFE? Open your eyes. You are in total denial if you believe that you are protecting people with this policy.

If the reason you rejected Bill's corneal tissue was because of the sexual assault which I had discussed with [the coroner], it happened when he was 14 years old. He was tested for HIV over a year later - much later than the six month window you mentioned. But no one took the time to find out the particulars - just a flat denial based on his being bisexual.

I am also shocked that a group who is using the facilities at a state funded hospital is able to do so with such blatantly discriminatory policies.

I am assuming that you were not stating your own personal beliefs in the letter, but the policy of the Lions Eye Bank. This makes it no easier. Institutional intolerance and discrimination are VERY personal. And institutions are made up of individual persons. If you do not agree with this policy, I urge you to help change it.

Silence is where the hate grows that killed my son.

At the end of July I received another letter from them, explaining that as a certified member of the EBAA they must adhere to medical standards established by a national medical advisory committee, with recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). They hoped I would understand that they had no choice but to decline the donation because the decision was based on national regulations...

There was a phone call later to see if I was still upset. They tried to get me to "understand" and I just wouldn't. Wrong is wrong.

The boys who assaulted Bill and Sam were finally sentenced to 20-30 days in juvenile detention followed by probation and community service and 4 hours of diversity training focusing on sexual orientation.

Missed He Will Be, But Not Forgotten ...

Bill's life and death has touched perhaps thousands of people. There was an outpouring of support for us here -- both from friends and from people we had never met. Throughout the time of the hate crime and Bill's suicide I have never felt so supported and connected to a community.

At the memorial for Bill I was given a letter written by Gery Gerst - Bill's History teacher at Olympia High School that year, who was unable to attend. In his letter he said:

"Bill was such a caring person, a sharer. He gave so much to me during lunch or before school. In class he shared insights that no one else did; what a big heart, gentle man, probing mind... in the time he was to be on this earth he touched so many lives in so many positive ways, especially mine. I want to tell you parents that both your sons have been kind, caring, giving, and considerate to me and I value that so much. In this world that is a tremendous legacy.

Clearly, as you can see by the turnout of support at Sylvester Park and now, Bill was and is loved. Fear not that he will be forgotten. Missed he will be, but not forgotten...

I'd like to write to Bill, now, what I would have written in his annual:

Bill, you have impressed me with your keen insights into history, government, and people. Your insight comes from deep caring and feeling, the result of being tested of character and perseverance. The world is lucky to have such as you for your demeanor is gentle and your dedication to truth and learning is without your original additions to after class. Your brain was always Thanks for help with "the" confidence in me, not to mention are going to be missed, but the time and know your time this year



exemplary. My class won't be the same discussions and your sharings with me working, and so was your heart. assembly and for your trust and your smile that showed you cared. You door's always open... drop by some was valued."

Nothing will bring Bill back. I am sharing his story in the hope that it can help in some way to put an end to the hate and homophobia. This world cannot remain so hard to live in and to have hope in -- not for all the "Bill's" who are out there now, and all who are yet to come.

Alec read "Bill's Story" and asked me to include this:

After Bill's death I found in one of his notebooks where he had drawn the gay symbol, a pink triangle. Across it he had written, "This is not my choice. This is not forced upon me. This just is."

We wanted to create some kind of memorial to Bill, and without making a conscious decision we realized that the best memorial we could create would be our own lives - working towards the elimination of the senseless and destructive hatred that is all too prevalent in our society. Of those who may be touched by Bill's story we ask one thing: join us.