

Melissa Perkins

Dr. William Thelin

Autobiographical Writing

8 April 2016

Our Different Orange Groves

In 2002, I was an twelve-year-old blonde who loved to cheerlead and play with my little brother after school. We grew up in the rural outskirts of Orlando. Where there were once dirt roads, now, the area is bursting with life around The University of Central Florida. We grew up around the orange grove farms, and we loved to pick the fresh orange and put the tangy slices in our mouths. After moving, not too far down the same street in Orlando, my brother become best friends with a boy named Aaron. They had met when playing four square in the classroom. My ornery brother had thrown the ball at Aaron's face. Where it bounced off and landed on the ground, my brother then decided to hand the ball back and subsequently ask Aaron to be his friend. Though strange after their recent situation, Aaron said "yes." Thus started our long friendship of bicycle rides to Publix and relaxing days spent at the park in the blistering Florida sun. While I was sound asleep at night, my brother was secretly watching *Queer As Folk* and making sure his "last" button was ready for a quick switch back if my mother walked in. It was after one of those nights that Aaron told my brother he liked boys. My brother answered back and a kinship began to burn. My bible I carried to school became a heavy decision. Our baptist church preached that homosexuality was blasphemous, but I was too close to my brother to care. At twelve years old I decided that I would rather burn in hell with him.

As kids, I don't believe we fully grasped the idea that being an outsider would change our whole existence. Discrimination was lurking its ugly head around every corner. At school. Out to dinner. In your own home. Recently, my step-father and I had a screaming match over the current presidential election. "All you care about is gay, gay, gay," he had said to me. "You care so much about your brother and all your gay friends." Fuck yes, I do. I eat, sleep, scream, and bleed gay rights. Maybe that's because I was there. We grew up when homophobia wasn't socially taboo. When the majority disagreed with gay rights. Homosexuality was not socially accepted. When the president and politicians talked openly about their anti-gay views and were not denounced by a large majority of the public (4). Especially in the home where family support is vital to the mental health of young children and young adults. In high school, my brother changed schools to avoid further bullying and met our friend Javier. Javier was out to some friends at school but still had to hide his sexuality from his parents. We were smoking cigarettes together recently, and after reminiscing about our high school days he turned to talk to me. His eyes seemed glazed, and though the story he told me was sad, we laughed together. Before he spoke, the smoke rolled off his lips and curled up towards the humid sky like waves.

"My parents weren't approving of it, a lot of certain friends of mine weren't approving of it. That's where it became an issue, as far as being accepted socially...I felt like I was being judged, and it affected me. My family is not happy about it at all. I had gotten caught, that was the main thing, I was caught talking to a guy on the phone in 8th grade, and it became a problem. It's totally normal—I come from a super religious Hispanic background. My parents even left a voicemail on the kid's parent's phone. I take it back. My Dad made me call the kid back and I gave him the wrong phone number. They left a message saying, "We need to talk. Our kids are talking about stuff they shouldn't be talking about." But that scared me. I mean—my parents

found out. I didn't want them to find out. BUT that never stopped me from talking to guys. I knew who I was. I kept talking to guys. My parents weren't accepting. But I was never going to stop being who I was. I guess I just understood the social part of it. It stopped me from bringing it to light. I had a recent conversation with my sister about it, and I told her I need to move out. I told her it's not that I want to leave my family. It's that I want to live my life, and you guys don't approve. They look down on me. Not a single person in my family supports me. My sister has recently been trying to relate to me about talking down on it. I have a neighbor who's gay and young, and he is very feminine and openly gay. She kept saying, "Oh he's doing too much." And my nephew says, "Oh, he is too much." And I'm like, how is he too much? He's just gay."

"It's not anything that's spoken about. It's just known. I once got huge hickeys on my neck. I didn't know that would happen when someone was doing that to your neck. My mom had seen it. I tried to put make-up on and it rubbed off. She had a feeling. She knew I hadn't been talking to women. They had already caught me on the phone. Her first reaction was to be upset. She was going off. Why did you do that? It's disgusting! Na, na, na, na, nah. I felt like if it was a woman. She wouldn't have acted like this at all. My Mom has never preached to me about it. She just says it's wrong. I would try to talk my mom about it, and if I told her something she didn't want to hear, she would hit me. In the end of the day, I was born this way. My dad was the most positive one out of everybody. My dad didn't accept it, but he never bashed me about it— versus, like the rest of my family. On my birthday this year, my mom said: "I wish you like many women!" All I had to do was give her a look and she was like "Oh my god. I'm just playing. I'm just playing." She knew she wasn't just playing. She was wishing that" (5).

The look on Javier's face as he finished showed the disappointment that lingered beneath his gaze. His feelings were understandable since research shows that LGBT youths who have

been rejected by their family have poorer health than their accepted peers. [That LGBT rejected youth are eight times as likely to have attempted suicide, nearly six times more likely to report high levels of depression, and more than three times more likely to use illegal drugs (6).] My own brother was rejected when he came out to my mother though my father was always accepting. My mother threw out his clothes and purses. She attempted to disconnect him from his best friend Aaron. Blocking of their child's LGBT friends is the most common way that parents react when conflicted about their gay children (6). And it is one of the worst ways to isolate and hurt your child. In the U.S., 1.6 million youth a year experience homeless, and 40% of those youths are LGBT. Half of all teens get a negative reaction when they come out to their parents, and nearly 1 in 4 are thrown out of their homes (7). These family issues are huge, and homophobia at home affects LGBT teens immensely—as you can see. That's not to say that all LGBT youth are rejected by their parents. Some of my friends were accepted by their parents when they came out to them. Some of them told me their parents cried, and they were scared for their kids. Because even they knew how terrifying it was at the time to be gay.

Even with the positive reception of some parents, the statistics for LGBT youth are staggering. The biggest problem LGBT teens surveyed (over 10,000 LGBT teens) stated was a lack of acceptance by parents and family. The second biggest problem of the teens surveyed was trouble at school and bullying (8). Even if LGBT youths are dealing with accepting parents in the home many deal with issues in their school culture. The government at the time oppressed the rights of LGBTs, and thus the school system followed suit. No federal laws existed until 2009 to protect gay people (4). At our high school, the Gay-Straight Alliance was openly distrusted. None of the administration attempted to speak about bullying to my homosexual friends, and the hateful words and aggressive behavior towards them took place every day.

A short time ago, I asked a friend of mine, Bailey, about when she attempted to reopen the Gay-Straight Alliance at my high school after it was previously banned for unknown reasons.

“Clover High had a GSA before, which is a gay-straight alliance, which is any school, high school, a middle school in the United States. That’s the gay club quote- unquote—the GSA. Clover High had a GSA before. I tried to open something with Trevor, when we started looking into it, we found that the GSA had been disbanded, like two or three years before. So I was like, a freshman? I don’t even know if I was in the school but apparently, something happened. They did something quote-unquote wrong and they weren’t allowed to have a GSA anymore. So Trevor and I were, like—okay, well we still want to have a safe place for us to go to what can we do as a substitute? So we made up our own club. We called it club TEST, Teens Educating Students for Tolerance. We thought it would be a great idea, and it took us a little bit longer than it should have to find a sponsor, which was basically a teacher we who’s room we could have the club in. But after all the hullabaloo of getting the club started the first meeting had, like, sixteen people in there, ya know? And two of them so happened to be my best friends now. So it was obviously a wanted club. There were kids that were interested, and we did minimal advertising for it. Time goes on. We get stuff situated. We basically— all we do is meet once a week; talk; make crafts; and talk about our lives, and where we came from, and how we realized where we are; and are we gay? Are we straight? Where do we stand? And then the gay pride parade was coming, and we were so excited. We were like, okay, we’re gonna do it—cause we’re a club. We are the gay club, let’s do it. We asked the school if we could participate and be a part of the parade because if you ask early enough your school can be a part of the parade and march in it. They said “Yeah, sure, but you can’t use any of our colors, and you cannot have our name on your banner. You can be in the parade, but you can’t represent us as a school.” I was like—okay? But that

completely defeats the purpose of why we wanna go! Like you're okay with us being the gay club as long as your name isn't attached to it. Whatever. We ended up not doing it because we were told by them that it was too much paperwork anyway. We were discouraged not to. That's the first time. The second time, there is a common class for students to take called business studies or BST. And part of the final project for BST graduates that are trying to graduate, and get credit and all that, was to make a sellable good, and make money, and make a profit off it, and be about to track it. Basically accounting 101. So we wanted to have a bake sale around the same time this BST project was going on, and we were told we were not allowed to bring any home cooked baked goods. They had to be pre-bought. They had to be sealed. You couldn't open them until you sold them. All for safety or whatever. Literally, a week later, BST did their thing and during lunch kids were selling ramen noodles out of a hot pot, they were making sloppy joes in front of kids. The whole courtyard was full of stands and kids. So they obviously lied to us because we weren't allowed to do it, but they were. I guess they were afraid we were gonna get AIDS in the cupcakes. Like, I don't understand what that was, but after that Trevor, and I looked and each other. And, you know, everything we wanted to do we're getting snowballed, we're getting punched in the face basically. It became too much. We're seventeen years old kids in high school. The teacher (sponsor) didn't even care, she just sat in the room while we talked. We were the only one's fighting for this to be a thing, and after we figured that out we just let it go" (9).

This is not the only story I have heard about school administration and lack thereof in protecting LGBT students in the late 2000s. The American Civil Liberties Union still has a section of their website completely dedicated to teaching LGBT teens how to protect themselves when their school is not taking their harassment issues seriously (10). Back then, teachers may have feared to say anything about the bullying to protect their job; but now that we are adults, I

think I just want some acceptance of responsibility. We remember the teachers and administration that added to the bullying and didn't care. I can remember multiple stories of teachers who wouldn't stand up to bullying for LGBT students—even when my friends were little kids.

“Society as a whole, and the press, and the media wasn't accepting and wasn't willing to accept gay people and the gay identity especially in the past as compared to today. I didn't realize that at the time, as an adult, I look back and it's so obvious. Back in 4th grade, I had a teacher who—you know, I knew I was gay. I didn't know what that meant. But I knew it. I just felt different. I knew that I was interested in men, but I just didn't understand all the implications of what it meant to be gay. But back then, I loved Sailor Moon. It was my favorite show, and I know it was specifically targeted at young girls. And I didn't know that it was weird that I liked it. And I was totally open about the fact that I, like, loved Sailor Moon. And I used to get made fun of really bad in 4th grade about that. And I remember one day, there was this particular kid that would pick on me for it. He started making fun of me for it, and the whole class started laughing at me and then the teacher started laughing with the class. She didn't come to my defense. She just sat there at letting the whole class laugh at me, and just joined in. I was so humiliated. I was so broken about it; for years. It was so hard for me to trust teachers. When you're a kid you don't understand how messed up that is, but as an adult you look back and you realize how fucked up that is.” (11).

Aaron, my brother Daniel, and I would rush home from school just to sit in front of the television and catch Toonami on *Cartoon Network*. Toonami was a show that displayed all of the new Japanese animation translated for American audiences. Its marathons of Sailor Moon kept us looking for a hero to save us with her feminine powers. Our love for anything weird and

obscure kept us seeking any new hobby that we fancied. Maybe the fantasy of it all swept us away. We were reading fantasy novels and playing edgy video games. We wanted to get our hands on anything that didn't conform to the culture we were distrustful of. More recently, my brother and I were reminiscing on when he realized he liked men. Not just the feelings but the exact moment. I wanted to know what it had been like. I was only a year older and too young to truly understand what all the teasing had been for.

“I didn't understand being so young, sexually, what being gay meant. But I remember, this stupid picture, this old movie called, Private Parts? And I remember the cover had him naked on it, and I remember thinking that he was hot. I was really little. I remember in Pre-K; I wore a snow white dress and the only thing I remember was crying in the hallway because people were making fun of me about it. In elementary school people always bullied Aaron and I. Then it wasn't until 8th grade when the bullying really got bad because I guess I was gothic and stuff. That segued into people making fun of me more. This one kid, Stuart, and him and his friends kept asking me if I was gay. I kept saying no because I didn't want them to know that I was. They would say, “We know you are.” And they kept laughing and calling me a faggot. Um, it was in my math class with a teacher named Ms. Lemon. She never did anything. She heard them calling me a faggot. She would tell them to stop talking, but she never acknowledged that they were bullying me. And I know she heard. They would start it and then the whole class would laugh at me. That's when I discovered self-harm, and drugs, and stuff” (12).

This gothic mentality perforated our whole friend group. It was popular at the time and also called to kids that felt they were rejected by society's clichés. But our acting out was met with total ridicule. Bullying was the biggest issue we dealt with at school. The name calling, food throwing, and intimidation were constant and corrosive. [According to the HRC survey,

51% of LGBT youth have been verbally harassed at school, compared to 25% of non-LGBT youth (8.) Verbal harassment was by far the worst for LGBT youth. It happened at school and outside of school. Slander was yelled at the school cafeteria and at the gas station, and during that time, it happened more frequently.

“High school wasn’t like elementary school. These people hate me because of who I am. They are not teasing me, and or making fun of me because we’re kids. They are attacking me for who I am. You have to create a defensive wall—almost an alter ego that’s a stronger person. Because on the inside you are just so—there is nobody validating your feelings. Nobody telling you that you are worthy of existing in this environment. You feel so alienated and you feel so alone and confused. Really you feel confused; confused and helpless. Because at that time you were old enough to understand that you were being discriminated against, but you weren’t old enough to take control of your life. Or to take yourself out of the situation, so you just have to sit there and take it. And there is nothing you can really do about it. The administration didn’t understand us. They didn’t care. The teachers wouldn’t have a discussion with me about that. About being gay or being discriminated against for being a gay teenager or student. The administration wouldn’t have even let teachers talk to students about those issues back then. I think it was considered taboo. And I bet teachers feared for their positions over it” (11).

“I remember—specifically remember me and Daniel walking around towards, like we were walking towards the breezeway and we’re, like, carrying our lunches, and I think Aaron with us. We were walking, and they had these benches out by the portables. These kids that sat there would scream faggot at us when we were eating. But I remember us not like, it had become like an ‘uh’ and you just walked. We just carried our food and continued walking. We had just become inert to it” (14).

“It [verbal assault] happens so often that it’s just accepted as the way it is. Even by the faculty. I started lashing out. Nowadays it’s really taboo to just call someone a faggot or say slander towards gay people. The media’s all super PC. But honestly, just a few year ago it wasn’t like that. I can remember every-day of high school walking down the hallway and someone calling me a faggot, or someone like, you know, jokingly coming up to me saying, “Oh, I bet you think he’s hot.” “You wanna touch him, or blah blah.” Some ignorant bullshit, you know. Everyday. On a daily basis. Complete strangers on the street calling you a faggot or giving you a dirty look. Literally, it happened so often that it was a part of life that you just had to accept. It was not that long ago. I had become so numb to it after a while. I didn’t hear then call me faggot anymore or see the dirty look. But other people, my friends, would become more offended than I was because they saw it. But after a certain amount of times being called a faggot you just stop hearing the word. Even as an adult, I get called a faggot still” (11).

“I was getting bullied. The teasing continued, but there were two groups that would say stuff to me every day. But every now and then someone would just say things. I actually got a lot of it in public. Even just going to Publix, I remember someone calling me a faggot when I was getting candy or something. I was getting verbally harassed constantly, and it was mainly because I was dressing eccentric, so it was more apparent that I was gay. Even recently, some dad and his young kid where shopping and the dad called me a faggot right in front of him” (12).

I think high school was a fond memory for some and for others it wasn’t. My step mom always seemed to brag about her eighties prom dance memories which somehow mimicked a cheesy movie. But high school for us was a wasted day. We couldn’t wait to leave and get high. An escape from a school which we felt we didn’t belong to. [In being excluded by their peers, 48% of LGBT students stated they have been excluded for being different when compared to

26% of non-LGBT youths. Those youths stated that school was the place they heard the most negative messages about being LGBT, followed by the internet, and their peers. As for physical attacks, 17% of LGBT youth stated they were often physically attacked at school compared to their non-LGBT peers at 10% (8).] In the LGBT community, physical attacks because of their sexual orientation are classified as hate crimes. And in the nineties, hate crimes against gays and lesbians increased from 1991 to 1995 by 35% (13). As gay issues became pushed into the press and media, physical attack threats against my friends became inevitable.

“There was the people that threw stuff at me, and that, it always scared me. I remember I was very, very like pacifist. I was scared of getting beat up. I didn’t want to stand up for myself because it was normally like six people. None of these people did it by themselves; it was always a group. I felt intimidated and didn’t want to do anything. I also didn’t wanna get suspended from school. It started off with throwing food at me and stuff. Then the whole situation with Aaron happened. I switched schools after” (12).

“So there’s only one time in high school where it almost came down to, like, I was gonna be in a physical altercation. I was walking home from the town center with Daniel and this car of kids from our school. Skater kids, the natural enemy of gay men in the early 2000s. They threw an egg out the car at Daniel’s head, and like, we turned to look at them. They stopped the car and started screaming “faggot” at us. So we were scared, so we ran into the neighborhood nearby and were hiding. They got out of their car, and there were like six or seven of them. They had their skateboards and were looking for us screaming and shouting “faggot” at us. They were going to jump us. Beat the shit out of us, literally. They got out of their car, chased us into a neighborhood, and trapped us. Cornered us. There was like eight of them and just me and Daniel. Finally, they found us because Daniel’s phone rang and we had to come out from behind

a car. They surrounded us and we were just walking slowly away, like as they were shouting for us. Eventually, I called my mom and she rushed over. And they literally chased us into my mom's car. I'm so sure that if my mom hadn't picked us up then we would have gotten our asses kicked by eight guys. Totally unprovoked. We were just walking home. And they were from my school. One of them was in my class, and I saw him at school the next day, and he didn't say anything" (11).

When Daniel walked in the door, I can remember the tears that soaked his cheeks. We both cried as I washed the eggs out of his hair in the bathtub. We hadn't done anything to them. We didn't understand. Though we would never let them see us cry, we wept together. To let the fear leave us and prepare to face it again at school the next day. We cleaned up and headed to sleep in hopes that our adult life would come and we could leave this shit town. Now that we are older, Daniel is still in Orlando and gets only small amounts of street harassment.

Currently, things are looking up and Daniel and I talk about the positive changes that have happened since our experiences. We had gone to gay pride parades throughout our young twenties and voted for gay marriage to pass in Florida (it didn't). And after centuries of social oppression in the United States, LGBT couples gained the right to legally marry in all fifty states on June 26, 2015 (1). It was a happy day for us and for everyone who supports the LGBT community. But not even a full year has passed, and we see push back already in the form of discriminatory bills in North Carolina, Arkansas, Tennessee, and many other states (2). Laws which justify acts of discrimination against anyone but are often used to refuse service to LGBT people, families, groups, and couples. Since the Supreme Court ruling on gay marriage rights, many feel that homophobia has slowly moved out of our society. Recently, Ru Paul did an interview where he discussed the topic of gay acceptance in mainstream society. "They talk so

much about acceptance now today and it's like, yes, but trust me — I'm old and I know this shit — it's superficial. Because as soon as the lights go out, you'll see how advanced people's thinking is. This so-called "*Will & Grace Acceptance*" era is just people fucking posing. Things haven't changed that much. You see it in politics right now — that's the fucking truth of people” (3). The idea that gay issues are over because the right to marry was won doesn't address the fact that discrimination and hate crimes against the LGBT community are still occurring frequently.

After the Supreme Court marriage ruling, multiple anti-gay attacks were carried out across the nation against LGBT people (15). In most recent news, I read a story about a gay couple in Atlanta, Georgia, that was attacked while they slept. On February 12, 2016, Anthony Gooden, 23, and Marquez Tolbert, 21, were laying on their bed sleeping when Tolbert's mother's boyfriend, Martin Blackwell, poured boiling hot water on them. The couple received second and third-degree burns. In the interview, Gooden's face is severely scarred from the boiling water. Tolbert underwent a skin graft to replace the burnt flesh from his back and thighs. His boyfriend Gooden still remains in the hospital with severe burns. Reportedly, the attacker had stated that he “couldn't stand looking at the men with all that gay.” “The pain doesn't let you sleep,” Tolbert told the press. “It's just like it's excruciating 24 hours a day.” In statements to police Blackwell noted that “They was stuck together like two hot dogs, so I poured a little hot water on them and helped them out. They'll be all right, it was just a little hot water” (16). Currently, Georgia does not recognize anti-gay hate crimes. Only 30 states plus D. C. have hate crime laws that cover sexual orientation. 11% of the LGBT population live in states with no hate crime law to protect them. 18% of the LGBT population live in a state which does not cover

sexual orientation in their hate crime laws (2). A gut-punching thought since Ohio sits right there in the second percentage group.

Currently, 77% of LGBT youth say that they know things will get better (8). Some of my gay friends stated that they experienced no forms of discrimination or harassment for being LGBT; though they all discussed coming to terms publicly with their sexuality was difficult in the social climate. There are still gay political issues, like the discrimination laws and parenting policies, affecting the LGBT community, and we will continue to fight for those rights. These stories of our experiences are our own. Every experience is different, but I wanted these to be read and heard. In our old sleepy orange grove laden city of Orlando, we were different. These stories were told to serve as a remembrance for times past and situations still currently happening to the LGBT community. I hope they will bring to light the homophobia that our generation, the generations before us, and the generation now deal with.

- (1) ProCon.org. "State-by-State History of Banning and Legalizing Gay Marriage, 1994-2015." *ProCon.org*. 16 Feb. 2016. Web. 6 Apr. 2016.
- (2) Transgender Law Center. "Non-Discrimination Laws." *Transgenderlawcenter.org*. Data current as of 12 Apr. 2016. Web. 12 Apr. 2016.
- (3) Jung, Alex. "Real Talk with Ru Paul." *Vulture.com*. 23 Mar. 2011. Web. 6 Apr. 2016.
- (4) Frankie-Ruta, Garance. "How American Got Past the Anti-Gay Politics of the '90s." *Theatlantic.com*. 8 Apr. 2013. Web. 6 Apr. 2016.
- (5) Javier. Personal Interview. 10 Apr. 2016.
- (6) Dr. Ryan, Caitlin. "Helping Families support Their Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Children." Fall/Winter 2009. San Francisco State University. PDF. 6 Apr. 2016.
- (7) True colors fund. "Our Issue." *Truecolorsfund.org*. 2016. Web. 6 Apr 2016.
- (8) Human Rights Campaign. "Growing up LGBT in America." *Hrc.org*. 2016. Web.
- (9) Bailey. Personal Interview. 23 Mar. 2016.
- (10) American Civil Liberties Union. "Know Your Rights: LGBT High School Students-What To Do If You Face Harassment At School." *Aclu.org*. 2016. Web. 6 Apr. 2016.
- (11) Aaron. Personal Interview. 24 Mar. 2016.
- (12) Daniel. Personal Interview. 9 Apr. 2016.
- (13) Cullen, M. Jennifer. "Homophobia in the 90s: intolerance and acceptance of alternative lifestyles." Master's Thesis. San Jose State University. 1997. PDF. 6 Apr. 2016.
- (14) Perkins, Melissa. Personal Interview. 24 Mar. 2016.

(15) Rosswood, Eric. "Violent Anti-LGBT Hate Crimes On The Rise After Marriage Equality Ruling." *Thenewcivilrightsmovement.com*. 30 June. 2015. Web. 6 Apr 2016.

(16) Lang, Nico. "Atlanta Man Pours Boiling Water on Sleeping Gay Couple." *Advocate.com*. 17 Mar. 2016. Web. 6 Apr. 2016.