



July/August 2006

When a Dos Equis Is More Than a Beer Peterson Toscano navigates the ex-gay movement

Peterson Toscano spent most of his life tortured by his sexual orientation. Fleeing from his same-sex predilection, Toscano tried almost everything to become straight—reparative therapy, religious conversion, exorcism, missionary work in both Ecuador and Zambia, and an 18-month stint in a residential ex-gay ministry. He even married.

But all was for naught. As a husband, he struggled to be faithful, still attracted to men. Living with his then-wife in New York City, not the most conducive environment to thrive as a born-again ex-gay, Toscano was emotionally paralyzed.

“I had two options,” Toscano says. “Set up an apartment somewhere. Get it all together and then say, ‘this is not going to work, I’m gay. I have to live this lifestyle.’ Or the other option was to kill myself—jump in front of the train.”

Toscano is not alone in failing to change his sexual orientation, or in contemplating suicide to relieve his turmoil. According to a study by psychologists Ariel Shidlo and Michael Schroeder of 202 former conversion therapy clients, 176 (87 percent) said that they had failed to change their sexual orientation. Of the 26 (13 percent) who reported “success,” only eight said that they had a heterosexual shift; seven of those were employed by or volunteered for ex-gay programs. Nearly 30 percent of all participants had attempted suicide.

He may have flopped as an ex-gay, but Toscano has flourished as a survivor of reparative therapy. Today, he is a proud ex-ex-gay—or, as some escapees from the movement identify themselves, a “Dos Equis.” Subsequently, Toscano has leapt out of the closet and into the spotlight. His work as a writer, actor and activist is informed by his journey from shame to acceptance to celebration of being queer. He performs throughout the United States and parts of Africa, using his theater pieces to refute homophobic stereotypes, encourage self-acceptance, especially among gay youth, and to build bridges between the LGBT and religious communities.

On a recent April evening in Vermont, more than 100 people jammed into the Bennington Unitarian Universalist Meeting House to see Toscano perform his *Doin’ Time in the Homo No Mo Halfway House*. This 90-minute one-man performance, through humor and pathos, excoriates the draconian and backward

methods of reparative programs. The piece is based on Toscano's stay at Love In Action International, a Christian residential program based in Memphis, Tenn., whose Web site claims to be "dedicated to restoring those trapped in sexual and relational sin through the power of Jesus Christ."

Toscano embodies five characters who give a birds-eye view of Love In Action and its effect on residents and their families. The audience learns about some of conversion-therapy techniques from Chad, the effeminate tour guide at Homo No Mo Halfway House, such as its football clinics, which Chad credits for "butching" him up. Toscano also plays a father who endures the excruciating family weekends—a role based on his own dad who supported him through Love In Action.

Love in Action is one of many ex-gay programs throughout the United States. Here in the Hudson Valley, Whosoever Will Ministry, begun by "ex-lesbians" Penny Dalton and Elaine Sinnard, is affiliated with Trinity Assembly of God in Middletown. Most conversion programs are connected to Protestant denominations; exceptions include the Catholic organization Courage International, and JONAH—Jews Offering New Alternatives to Homosexuality.

Toscano's quest to become straight took him to South America, Africa, and beyond, but it began in Sullivan County, where he grew up. By early puberty, fearful of his same-sex attractions, he began a frantic sprint toward heterosexuality.

"By 12 or 13, I became more sexualized," Toscano says. "Sex was bad and sex was dirty. Gay sex was particularly bad and dirty. It was right before AIDS, but there was a lot of backlash to the sexual revolution."

Toscano's repulsion and guilt made him embrace Catholicism. He saw his devotion to the Church as both a rebellion against his liberal Italian family's tepid faith as well as a retreat from his sexual desires. He decided to become "the best damn Catholic" he could be, and spent inordinate time at church and at the local Catholic Youth Organization (CYO).

At age 15, he got "saved" by a religious experience that happened in his bedroom over his family's restaurant, Pete's Pub, in Lake Huntington.

"I had on my own, all by myself, a very significant personal encounter with God, where I just felt this rich, loving presence in my bedroom that was just so loving and accepting," Toscano says. "And I gave my heart over to it."

He recounted the details to two evangelical women who sang at his CYO meetings. They told him that he was born again. Toscano accepted their word and joined their church, Gospel Tabernacle, in Honesdale, Pa. There he confided in the pastor that he was struggling with his sexual orientation.

“He was thrilled to help me,” Toscano says. “And he began counseling me, giving me Bible verses to memorize. I culturally changed radically overnight. I got rid of my rock music. Billy Joel was gone.”

He gave up “Just the Way You Are,” “Honesty” and “My Life” only to have them replaced by the required armor of ex-gays—disguise, deception and fiction. The roller-coaster ride through conversion therapy lasted nearly 20 years. He finally got out in 1997.

Through it all, Toscano’s family—parents Pete and Anita, sisters Nardina and Maria, and unofficial “adopted” brother from Spain, Manuel—stuck by his side. In many ways, *Doin’ Time in the Homo No Mo Halfway House* is as much a tribute to family as it is a diatribe against the ex-gay movement.

Pete Toscano, who served in both the marines and army, belies the stereotypes of Italian father and soldier. He is proud of his gay son and sees his performances often.

“I think he’s helping a lot of people,” the senior Toscano says. “A lot of people don’t want to come out in the open. Sometimes people hold things inside and it’s a bad situation. Before you know it, they either commit suicide or turn to dope.”

While he supports his son, it’s not without its difficulties.

“It’s a little tough, to tell you the truth,” the 75-year-old father says. “I miss his wife. Because his wife was part of our family. And she was a real wonderful girl.

“And he’s got no children. That’s another part I miss, to carry the Toscano name,” he continues. “But we’re happy with him—very happy with him.”

Like his father, Peterson Toscano pulls no punches about life as a Dos Equis. He notes two common themes. One is the Christian testimony stating that before coming to Jesus, the individual is lost and miserable, but once saved, life is beautiful. The other is the notion that being in the closet makes life miserable and contributes to self-hatred, but by coming out, life is fabulous.

“They’re both bullshit,” Toscano says. “I mean, yeah, things are decidedly better, and I’m much clearer and I have so much more hope. But humans are complex beings, and to deny the fact that I get sad and lonely and worry about the future is denying reality.”

Perhaps Toscano’s realism is what allowed him to see the ex-gay movement for what it is and reclaim his life.