

## PARTY LIKE IT'S 1999—Ben's Coming Out Story

The year was 1999, and we were rapidly careening toward the end of the century, the end of the millennium, and the end of the world as we awaited the destructive Y2K bug to swoop in and destroy our civilization.

While working at Microsoft, I was living in a house with two Born-Agains. Gene owned the house, and Larry and I were tenants. I was volunteering at my church extensively: writing sketches for the services, directing the Christmas plays, and singing backup vocals.

Another of my other extracurricular activities was traveling with Mickey and his ex-gay team to churches around Puget Sound. Mickey was trying to foster understanding so that gay people in these churches didn't have to go through what so many of us had gone through in our churches. I wrote sketches for him and even performed in some of them. I was loving life. God was allowing me, finally, to live out my dream. Writing, performing, and traveling were my true passion.

Yet despite all this success, I was still attracted to men and that attraction was getting stronger. My beach ball wanted to surface. One day I decided to go up on the Internet and research gay bars in the Seattle area. At the time of my search only a couple of them were online, so I visited one of them. At the bar, I met a guy who introduced me to the bathhouses in Seattle. At the bathhouse, I could have sex with anyone who wanted to. It was easy. You walked around in a towel. Then other guys would pass you, and if they were interested they would give you a look. If you looked back, then you were hooked up.

This was my first time with a man in a really long time, and it was amazing. During the whole experience I was in ecstasy. I finally got to experience all those things I had wondered about. I ran my hands up and down their bodies. I experienced the physical connection with them and I felt free. I left the bathhouse and went home.

Before long, I signed up for an internet dating service and even joined a gay league baseball team. It was like having a new family. All my Christian friends were impressed at the change coming over me, though I didn't dare tell them what was going on.

The new millennium was now upon us and while everyone around me worried about the Y2K bug, I worried about where my life was going to end up. Would I keep trying to change my orientation, or would I just give up and be me. I was truly on the verge of a major decision that I wasn't sure how I was going to be able to make.

One Friday night I went out to my favorite bar and had a little too much to drink. I didn't really want to drive home in that condition so I decided to spend a few hours at the bathhouse. Of course when I tell my friends that this was why I was at the bathhouse, they all look at me and nod in a sort of "if that's what you want us to believe, that's what we'll pretend we believe" sort of way. The bathhouse was attractive to me because I had just come out and I didn't know anyone. This was a way to experience connection to another human being that I had been denying myself for most of my life.

The next night, Saturday night, my sister Rachel, who was by now a flight attendant for American Airlines, living in Boston, came into town. So I went to visit her along with several of our mutual friends from church. We all had a fun time and stayed up late and reminisced and separated when the restaurant closed. I left home early Sunday morning to be at a ballgame. Sunday afternoon the teams were invited to one of the local bars. At the bar I met somebody who wanted me to go home with him, and I ended up spending the night. The next morning, on Monday, I went home to take a shower and change my clothes before going to work.

At the house, I found a note on my pillow from the owner which read, "Ben, the police were here asking some serious questions... What's going on Ben?" Attached to the note was a business card from a

police officer along with his title: "Detective: Homicide." Needless to say, that was a bit disturbing, so I picked up the phone and called the number on the card.

The first thing the detective said to me was that he wanted to know what was going on at the club over the weekend, and why I didn't stick around when my partner went into convulsions. Okay, so this wasn't about someone I knew, but I was still confused. I don't remember anyone going into convulsions. That's something that, even drunk, I'm sure I would remember.

I told the officer that, and he got a little irritated.

"You're not in any trouble," he kept reiterating, "I just want to know what happened."

"I don't even know what you're talking about," I repeated.

"Look, the guy died and we want to know why."

"If someone had died next to me then I think I would have remembered it."

"We have proof that you were there."

"I'm not denying I was there, but nobody died when I was there; at least not that I was aware of."

"You're not in any trouble, we just need the truth."

"And I'm telling you the truth."

The argument went like this for over a half-hour. Finally, he said, "Look, we have it on video surveillance tape."

So I said, "I'm going to take a shower and get dressed, and then I'm coming down to the station and we can look at this tape." I asked for his address and told him that it would take me about a half-hour to hour to get showered and get downtown.

He backed down and took a less accusatory tone. Which also meant that he started talking to me about what actually happened, rather than grilling me about what I supposedly did.

Through that I was able to ascertain that the guy in question had apparently overdosed, and when he started convulsing, whoever had been with him at the time, ran away. This all happened on Saturday night—while I was with my sister and our friends. I was at the club on Friday night. It had nothing to do with me at all. But the damage was done. The police pretty much outed me when they visited my roommates on Saturday night while I was with my sister.

That massive decision I was on the brink of making had just been made for me.

The Born-Agains didn't want me living with them anymore, so I would be looking for a new place to live. My contract with the Microsoft Corporation was up that month as well, and so I would be looking for another job. On top of that, I had to leave my church. My roommate told our mutual friends at church, and because of my visibility, word spread like wildfire.

I never spoke to anyone from that church after that.

By now it was coming up on Mother's Day, 2000. This meant that I had to take my mother to dinner and tell her why I was coming out after all this time. After fifteen years trying to drown my beach ball, I was forced to let the ball surface. Thanks to the police, I was coming out in a way that would not allow me to go back in, even if I wanted to.