

My Fraternity Closet

by Robert L. York Jr.

Sean's story made the front page of the newspaper. The headline read college student commits suicide on playground. Sean knew he had lost everything. Sean did not want the fraternity to be plagued with the reputation of allowing homosexuals into the brotherhood of the chapter. Like so many young gay people, Sean became another number and statistic. Why did he have to die?

By the time I graduated from high school, I knew I was gay. I was terrified! How could a God-fearing, Assembly of God church boy from Oklahoma possibly fall into the devil's hands? The homosexual lifestyle was against the Bible's teachings. As Pentecostal holy rollers, we were taught that this lifestyle was not to be accepted. How could a man possibly love another man? I was always taught as a kid that I would spend eternity in hell for living and accepting the homosexual lifestyle. "Homosexuals choose to live this way. They are living a lie, and they will perish in the fires of hell with all the other Sodoms and Gomorrahs," said the local pastor. As I struggled for acceptance of who I was, it was an excerpt from his preaching that forever would be ingrained into my memory.

High school was over! I walked across the stage and received my piece of paper that said I could become an adult and a part of society. I had been offered several scholarships to an in-state college. I had decided to get away from home, my family, and the church. I needed space to find out who I was and what I would become without the influences of the church and my family. I knew that I needed to get out and away from the Bible Belt and learn who I was and what I was feeling inside, emotionally and physically. I went to the in-state college, two hours away from home. The distance was far enough to feel as if I were starting a new life. I continued to hide in the closet about my true sexual identity, however. I knew a few students on campus who were from my hometown, and I was terrified to think that they might out me back home if they knew I was gay.

I moved into the dorms, like all freshmen must do, and found out that a friend of mine from high school was living down the hall. David was a year ahead of me and had already completed his first year of college. I knew David through other friends in high school and had heard several rumors that he was gay. David became a very good friend that first month in

college. He told me that he was gay and was involved in a relationship with someone in the local town where we were attending college. I was stunned and shocked at his honesty. He said that it was a very hard decision to make when he came out to his family and friends. David was the all-American athlete and star pupil of his class. I had heard the rumors in high school and told him about what I had heard. David knew that people were talking about him, and he also knew that his religious background would not make coming out an easy process.

Since high school I had been interested in being a fraternity man. Girls loved the thought of dating a fraternity man. My thought was that it would be cool. I would be able to belong to a group of men that people would envy. I had come from a broken home since I was one year old. Belonging to a fraternity would give me a chance to belong to a family that shared the same ideals, goals, and common bond. I would be able to party, meet new people, and meet women. Since early on, I had dreams of being a Greek man. Looking forward to rush week, I hoped I would be given a bid from a fraternity house. I would just have to wait and see.

The fall semester of my freshman year was a great one. David and I were contacted by the Office of Student Services and Activities about reactivating a chapter of a national fraternity. David and I were both on leadership scholarships, and the administration was looking for young men who could breathe new life into the fraternity. We had a pledge class of 12 young men who were all on leadership scholarships. After four months of pledgship, David became president and I became vice president of the fraternity. David was very honest with me one day. He said that if anyone were to find out that he was gay, he would have to go public but that he would not step down from the presidency. Our national fraternity did not look kindly upon gay people being involved with the fraternity. It was considered to be an embarrassment to the chapter as well as a public image problem. It was the kiss of death. It was after being initiated, and also because of David's honesty, that I finally told him about who I was and the emotional struggle that I was going through. I was so terrified about being a gay man. I had so many questions about everything. The struggle that was taking place in my head and my heart was starting to tear me apart. David understood exactly what I was facing emotionally and listened to me with great compassion. His guidance, support, and care helped me to understand more about being gay. None of the other brothers knew that the two leaders of the fraternity were gay. If our national fraternity knew, we would have been barred for life. David and I never talked about things

in the dorm or even on campus. It was not safe to talk, because we never knew who might be listening.

Shortly thereafter I decided to move back to Oklahoma City and continue my education closer to home. A university there was offering more scholarship money, and my fraternity was one of the largest on campus. Also, David had accepted a scholarship to another university in New York to focus more on his degree. A new door had opened as the other one had closed. I transferred all of my college hours and credits and petitioned to become affiliated with the fraternity chapter on campus. I was vice president at my home chapter before moving. It was rare to hold that office as a sophomore. It was also rare for houses to allow a brother to affiliate. My conversation with the chapter adviser was a long one. He said that the chapter did not often allow brothers from other universities to affiliate but that I was welcome to stop by and see if the chapter liked me. I met the president of the fraternity and most of the other officers on that day. Of course, I was asked all of the routine questions and basically rushed all over again. I told them I was really interested in affiliating with the chapter and asked if they would please consider me for membership in their chapter at the next business meeting. They held their first business meeting the following week, and not only was I accepted into the chapter, but I also was elected as vice president. The chapter had elected a vice president in the spring, and he had decided not to return to school. Another door had been opened, and it was also the beginning of the nightmare.

I began the fall semester of 1988 as the new vice president of the fraternity, and I made the varsity cheerleading team; I had also won three scholarships to help pay for tuition. By the end of the first month of school, I had become involved with a host of activities, one of which was the Interfraternity Council. This council was the governing body of the fraternities in the Greek system. The fall elections were to be held the second month after school started. My fraternity slated my name for nomination as Greek week chairman and as secretary-treasurer of the IFC. I won. My social life now was committed totally to the Greek system. I had no choice; I now had no personal or social life outside the fraternity system. My private life would become totally nonexistent. In just two months I had gone from just a face in the crowd as a new sophomore to big-man-on-campus-in-training. I certainly would not be able to tell anyone how I really felt inside and that I was gay. I perceived and feared that if I did, I would be barred from my fraternity, kicked out of office, and chastised by my peers in the Greek system.

There were several fraternities and sororities on campus. Everyone involved in the Greek system was very active in their houses, and we all got along really well together. The year before I arrived on campus had not been a good one for the Greek system; there had been some unfortunate circumstances. A member of a sorority house was killed in a car accident in the summer, and a fraternity house had lost its past president (who was also past IFC president) as a result of suicide in the previous spring. The Greek community was still dealing with the grief and loss. The fall I arrived became a time of healing and outreach for everyone. I think that is why we were so respectful of each other and got along so well together. The Greek community was afraid of losing more sisters and brothers and was working hard to strengthen the community. Although the bond was strong in the Greek community, I knew that if my homosexuality were made public, I would be banished. I was living in the buckle of the Bible Belt. I needed to be conservative, reserved, and play everything straight in order to survive as a big man on campus.

The fall semester was busy, with a host of activities and fall rush. Our fraternity was busy trying to build our membership. We had 20 men pledge our house for the fall, which was a high number, considering that the average pledge class was only about 13 or 14. Not only was the pledge class large in number, but it also included a lot of quality men. Ten were from the leadership council, and the rest were athletes from various sports on campus.

There was one guy named Jon who signed with us and who always made me feel uneasy. He was a freshman just starting college, and he was attractive; he was a magnet for all of the sorority women. He attended all of the rush parties and meetings and was very persistent about wanting to be a part of our fraternity. The chapter extended a bid to Jon, and he became a pledge. The time came for the pledges to choose a big brother, someone with whom they felt comfortable and to whom they could look as a role model. Seven guys picked me as their big brother, including Jon. I was very honored to know that so many of the new guys felt comfortable with me, but I could not possibly have taken them all as little brothers. I narrowed it down to four and took them under my wing. I decided not to choose Jon, since I just did not feel comfortable around him. Jon was pretty upset that I had not chosen him as a little brother. He had a very fragile ego. Jon started calling me and whining that I did not want to spend time with him and that I did not really want him to be in the fraternity. I soon realized that Jon was like me; he was gay, and he was needing to confide in someone.

This was a nightmare that I wanted no part of. I knew that if I reacted to his cry for help, we would be barred from the fraternity. I became very frightened. I had worked so hard to accomplish my goals. I felt as though my world would crumble if my peers found out that I was gay. I was living in fear. Why couldn't Jon quit our fraternity, disappear, and leave me alone? I became very agitated with the entire situation. My fear was blocking a friendship Jon desperately needed in his life, but I chose to hide from reality.

My facade worked just fine. Jon and I became distant, and he looked elsewhere for friendship. Jon became really close with one of our little sisters, Susan. He confided in Susan and told her about his true feelings and identity. Jon became extremely jealous of his roommate and the friendship we were developing. The pledge class was moving along really well until the last two months of pledgship. Jon and Susan had decided they were going to break up the pledge class and try to ruin the reputation of some of the members of my fraternity. My name was first on the list. Jon made up this wild story that another member and I had accosted him on campus over by the student activities building while he was out jogging one night. He said that we had made sexual advances toward him. He notified all the pledges and told them the outrageous story, and they believed him. It was a story he and Susan had fabricated in hopes of outing me. The only thing I could think of was, Why? Why me? Susan and Jon wanted to see if I would run away scared or confess that I was gay.

The brothers of my chapter immediately called an emergency meeting. The other fraternity brother who was named in the accusation and I explained that the story was a fabrication created by Jon and Susan. We could not possibly have been where he said we were on the night when it supposedly happened. We were both in a president's club meeting with 50 other people that lasted three hours. The chapter voted, and many of the members knew that the story was a lie. A lot of the brothers had started to notice that Jon was different and thought that he might be gay. I was terrified that they would find out about me.

In the end, Jon was released as a pledge from our fraternity. I realized, as my brothers did, that Jon was looking for sympathy and also looking for a way to get back at me for rejecting him as a little brother. He had written a suicide letter because he did not like being rejected and was starving for attention. His roommate, my little brother, turned the suicide letter over to the sheriff's department, and Jon was taken into the custody of county

officials for psychiatric care. We thought that the nightmare had ended until we found out that Jon and Susan tried to contact the school newspaper about the alleged story. The newspaper had no interest. The editor contacted our fraternity and found the story to be nothing but gossip. Jon and Susan had failed. Everyone knew it was a lie. I felt a complete sadness about the whole incident. I knew Jon was searching for acceptance, companionship, and friendship in other men and trying to deal with his sexuality. My perception still had not changed. There was no way I could be brought into the situation, since I knew I would be destroyed and cast out by my peers.

We survived that fall semester and initiated the entire pledge class, except Jon. The spring semester was pretty quiet, and I was moving on with my life by staying very busy with activities on campus. The spring semester is also a time of elections for the fall semester for the next year. I was nominated for president of my fraternity and for president of the IFC. I won both elections. I was still hiding my gay identity. I felt I had to hide and that there was no other choice! I was concealing my identity so well that I even had a girlfriend in one of the sororities.

The entire spring semester was one I will never forget. That was only a start of what was to come for me in my college career. I knew in my heart that nothing would ever come of my relationship with my girlfriend. She was a good friend, and we enjoyed spending time together. We were engaged for a year and a half. I knew it was a stupid thing to do, but I had to hide my identity. She never questioned anything. She was a very religious girl and, therefore, not having sex was never a problem. Her family had raised her to save herself until marriage. I was very much relieved by all of this. I knew that I would never be able to do anything sexually with her. I didn't even really like to kiss her. My facade of our relationship was working. I knew I needed to have a cover to keep any minds from wondering if I might be gay. Michele was the perfect Christian girlfriend. We were the all-American collegiate Christian couple. Winning both elections forced me further into the closet and forced me to be more public with Michele right by my side. Why couldn't I just be me and live my life like everyone else? We ended the spring semester and prepared for the fall of 1989.

During the summer break I was struggling with my emotions. I had one gay friend (Russell) whom I could occasionally call, but even then I was fearful that someone would be listening in on the conversation. I was always watching my back, looking around the corner and being careful about

every move that I made. Russell was very supportive and was never quick to judge me. He knew as well as I did that I was not ready to deal with my homosexuality. Once again, my perceptions were trapping me more and more each day. Russell had invited me to a couple of gay parties. I declined the invitations because I was afraid I would run into someone from college. Living in fear was starting to destroy me inside and out.

The 1989 fall semester began with a bang. Everyone had returned to school, and the Greek system was growing rapidly, which meant a busy schedule for me. I not only had to fulfill the duties of my fraternity, but I also had to look after the other fraternities and make sure they were meeting guidelines and regulations. I managed both duties quite well. The other fraternities liked the fact that I did not play favorites and that everyone was treated fairly and with respect.

Each year the fraternities and sororities nominate one person from each of their houses to represent them for the Outstanding Greek Man and Woman of the Year competition. I was fortunate enough to win the nomination and the title for the fall of 1989. It was the highest honor a Greek man or woman could win in college. It meant a lot because you were picked by your peers for your commitment and service to the Greek community. My identity was still a safe secret. No one had any idea that I was gay. Michele and I were the happy couple, and many of our friends said we would be married someday.

The 1990 fall semester was finally here, and I was finally a senior! I was still president of my house and president of the Interfraternity Council. The 1990-1991 academic year was by far the best year of my college career. I was well-respected by my peers and by the faculty of the college. I was elected as homecoming king, received numerous campus and national awards, and was picked by the faculty and students as an Outstanding Campus Leader for 1990-1991. It was an awesome experience. I had truly become the classic overachiever of my fraternity and campus. I was very grateful to everyone for thinking so highly of me and of the hard work that I had contributed to the campus. However, I was still hiding. Hiding from my peers and from myself. I had a lot to be proud of, but deep inside my heart and soul, I was miserable. I knew that I was living a lie and being dishonest about who I really was. I wanted so much to let people know that I found men attractive and that I would one day find a man that I would love and care for as my partner or spouse. I continued to struggle with who I was, where I was going, and exactly what life was all about. Was I ready to face myself and accept being gay? It was becoming more of a possibility as I

approached graduation, which would open doors that had been locked for such a long time.

Earlier I mentioned that a young man had committed suicide the year before I arrived on campus. His suicide was why I chose to hide within my fraternity closet. I will refer to him as Sean. Sean was an all-American kid. He was president of his fraternity and president of the IFC. He was a member of one of the largest fraternities on campus. He was also an Outstanding Greek Man his senior year and received a lot of the same honors I had received. Like me, he also dated a girl from a sorority on campus. He was idolized and well-respected by the Greek community, students, and the faculty. He had even been offered a position with the university after graduation.

As you've probably guessed, Sean was gay. At the time he was dating a sorority girl, he was also dating "Matt," one of his fraternity brothers. They had decided that Sean needed to date a woman as a cover so that they could continue their gay relationship. Sean and his lover thought they had planned everything perfectly. They were able to fool a lot of people, until one day when everything was turned upside down for Sean.

Sean and Matt had skipped class to be together. They had, however, forgotten to lock the door behind them at the fraternity house. One of the other fraternity brothers had stopped by the chapter house to see if Sean was there, and when he opened the door to Matt's room, he discovered them in bed together. He immediately became enraged, and within hours he had notified the entire fraternity chapter about what he had witnessed at the house. Sean and Matt escaped from their fraternity house and were nowhere to be found. Sean's fraternity called an emergency meeting, and his brothers met to decide his fate as a member. As the story has been told, they had decided to expel Sean from the fraternity and strip him of all honors. They did not want anything to do with a gay man being in their brotherhood. They did not even try to reach Sean for his side of the story. I tried several times to get the details of how things happened that day with Sean. Many of the people who were there that semester refused to talk about the incident. I believe many felt remorse and were saddened that they were not able to be more open and accepting of who Sean really was. It did not really matter what Sean's brothers had said or voted on that day at the fraternity house, because the state newspaper would tell Sean's story in the next day's headline.

Sean's story made the front page of the newspaper with the headline college student commits suicide on playground. Sean knew he had lost everything he had worked so hard to obtain. He could not bear to think about what his fraternity brothers would do to him. Sean took his life into his own hands and decided to spare his brothers and his house the embarrassment. Sean did not want them to be plagued with the reputation of allowing homosexuals into the brotherhood of their chapter. Like so many young gay people, Sean became another number and statistic, with hundreds of others who have committed suicide-because no one would listen, understand, or accept them when they needed it the most.

Sean had been living at home his senior year with his parents, trying to save money. His parents lived near an elementary school. That is where they found Sean that morning after the revelation. Sean had committed suicide by hanging himself from the monkey bars. Why did he have to die? Why could he not be the same person people admired and respected before the "horrible secret" came out? Why could they not have accepted the fact that Sean was in love with a man? Nothing had changed about who he was and what he was able to contribute to the Greek community.

I heard Sean's tragic story about a month after arriving at college during that fall semester of 1988. The story was very frightening and very real. It was also a story that a lot of people tried to avoid talking about. His brothers and other students were guilt ridden because they felt responsible for Sean's suicide. I was terrified after hearing that story. I was envious of Sean and Matt's relationship, and at the same time Sean's suicide scared me to death. I felt I had to stay hidden and not reveal that I too was gay.

Sean and I had so much in common. We had the same background as student leaders and had accomplished a lot of the same things as students at the university. I was scared to death that if someone found out that I too was gay, I would be another headline. I would be the one with the noose around my neck or the razor cuts across my wrists. I would be chastised, humiliated, and persecuted, just because of who I was. It would not matter what I had done for the Greek system, my peers, or the university. I would be labeled gay, a leper in the community. It was after hearing the tragic story of Sean that I chose to conceal my identity and to live in fear. I would hide my secret and carry it with me until after graduating from college.

I now look back and think about all the gay and lesbian students out there on college campuses. They need leaders, role models that they can look to for advice and courage. I wish I had been able to tell people that I was gay

while attending college. At that time I simply was not ready to accept myself as a gay man. If I had been ready, I could have been a leader for the student gay community. But I chose to hide in my closet. I chose to live by society's rules and the laws of the church. It is amazing how peer pressure affects all of us. I was very disappointed with my actions and my stand on gay rights while I was in college. I chose to go with the crowd and make ugly jokes. I conformed to their thoughts and their ideas about the gay community. I chose to accept them instead of accepting myself. I was living a lie and living in denial.

After graduation I came to accept myself. I started to experience a whole new world and the gay lifestyle. I could no longer hide, and I felt safety in numbers. I had joined the fraternity because I was looking to belong, and now I was a part of my real family, the gay community. My new gay friends and family were willing to accept me for who I was and not who I could pretend to be. I was in search of the fellowship and brotherhood of gay men and women. My fraternity experience had given me a brotherhood of men who were interested in the same ideals and goals but were prejudiced against certain aspects of society. I had been going through the motions to please everyone else. Now I could live openly as a gay man.