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LAKE WORTH CONVERSION THERAPY

City opposes ‘conversion therapy’

Lake Worth bans efforts to change the sexual orientation of minors.

By Kevin D. Thompson
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

LAKE WORTH — Since he was a young boy growing up in Lake Worth, Andy Amoroso knew he was gay.

He never felt as if his sexual orientation was wrong. He didn't

need to be fixed or miraculously cured.

It helped that his family was always supportive of him and his younger sister, Dawn, a Palm Beach County sheriff's deputy, who also is gay.

"You're born this way," said Amoroso, 52, now a city commissioner who owns a novelty shop off Lake Avenue. "No one can change you."

But there are groups that try under a controversial practice



Andy Amoroso has taken the lead in banning "conversion therapy" on minors.

called "conversion therapy," where a health-care professional tries to change someone's sexual orientation or gender identity.

Lake Worth is joining other cities and states in banning the

practice. On Tuesday, city commissioners unanimously voted to prohibit anyone in the city from using conversion therapy on a minor, although it could still be used on adults. A public hearing is scheduled for Jan. 10.

Conversion therapy usually is done through spiritual or psychological treatment that's meant to uncover a childhood trauma that is believed to have caused someone to be gay.

In the past, such extreme mea-

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asures as castration and electroshock therapy were applied, according to the National Center for Lesbian Rights.

Ban continued on B4

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The practice, often employed by religious groups, has been discredited by many leading psychological organizations, including the American Psychological Association and the American Medical Association.

'Devastating impact'

"Conversion therapy is like snake oil," said Rand Hoch, president of the Palm Beach County Human Rights Council, an organization that works toward ending discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.

"Unscrupulous practitioners have been peddling it for years — like a cure for cancer. But cancer is actually a disease that can be treated. Being LGBT is not a sickness or a mental deformity."

Rachel Needle, a West Palm Beach psychologist and certified sex therapist, said research has found that so-called therapies aimed at changing someone's gender identity or sexual orientation can lead to shame, guilt, depression and feelings of anger.

"Attempting to change someone's sexual orientation can have a devastating impact on a minor," Needle said.

State-licensed mental health professionals are not allowed to try to change a minor's sexual orientation or gender identity in California, New Jersey, Vermont, Oregon, Illinois and the District of Columbia, according to the National Center for Lesbian Rights.

"I'm concerned for gay, young adults," said Amoroso, who drafted the Lake Worth ordinance with the help of the human rights council. "There's suicide and mental illness that comes out of this practice. It's barbaric."

Lake Worth Commissioner Ryan Maier, who also is openly gay, called the practice "disgusting" and "ineffective."

"I don't know if this is happening anywhere in Lake Worth, but it's definitely happening in the country," Maier said.

West Palm Beach recently passed a similar law, joining Miami Beach, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh and Seattle.

This past summer, the human rights council said it identified six licensed psychologists who were offering conversion therapy in Palm Beach County.

Pence denies support

The practice has been in the news lately, with groups claiming Vice President-elect Mike Pence supports the therapy, a charge Pence's camp denies.

But a statement on Pence's archived website for a 2000 congressional campaign regarding the Ryan White CARE Act, which provides federal money for patients with HIV/AIDS, suggests that the government should finance institutions that support conversion therapy.

"Resources should be directed toward those institutions which provide assistance to those seeking to change their sexual behavior," the statement reads.

A Pence spokesman told the New York Times in November that the statement was misinterpreted and that statements saying the vice president-elect supports the therapy are "patently false."

'I became ashamed'

The psychological scars resulting from conversion therapy is very real to Michael, who lives in Lake Worth and grew up in the Midwest with his adoptive parents.

Michael, 41, didn't want his last name used.

He's very familiar with conversion therapy-like methods. While Michael wasn't sent to a professional, his parents used strict methods when he was about 13 to turn him straight.

"They tried everything to convince me I was everything but what I was," Michael said. "They wanted to fix me."

Michael's adoptive parents, particularly his father, a retired military officer, were physically, mentally and verbally abusive. They threatened to institutionalize him.

"My adoptive dad thought he could cure everything the way the military did," Michael said. "Break it down and rebuild it the way you want it. As long as I was a minor, they could do all this stuff."

The treatment from his adoptive parents, whom Michael said died in 2008, had a lasting effect on him.

"I became ashamed of everything I thought I was," Michael said.

Feelings like those are what Amoroso hopes a ban can prevent.

"At the end of the day, when you're gay, you're gay," he said.

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