



Columbia College grad explores 'ex-gay' lives

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<http://chicago.gopride.com/news/article.cfm/articleid/29803401>

CHICAGO, IL -- Blair Mishleau is taking an after-college adventure, but not one of the backpacking-through-Europe variety.

The 22-year-old Mishleau, who graduated from Chicago's Columbia College this month and is headed home to Janesville, is exploring the "ex-gay" world, collecting video interviews of men and women who, for whatever reasons, are suppressing their same-sex attractions or struggling with their sexuality.

Mishleau also is preparing for a student teaching gig this summer and then a full-time teaching post this fall in Minneapolis-St. Paul as part of the Teach for America program.

"I'm hoping to start a com- passionate dialogue between the ex-gay and gay community," he says. "Being com- passionate and loving is the best way to start a dialogue. ... We forget that everyone wants to be loved at the end of the day."

Mishleau stresses the importance of "humanizing everyone" in a world where people dive into the Web and, with a few keystrokes, wish death and destruction on strangers who offend, oppose or outrage them. He mentions a man he interviewed who is avoiding same- sex relations and the casual conversation they had about collecting pinball machines.

"These are people," Mishleau says of those struggling with or suppressing their homosexuality.

He's talked with a college student in suburban Chicago, a middle-aged man living with HIV, the pinball enthusiast and several others.

He recorded his first inter- view in Villa Park, Ill. "That's where a subject was willing to chat with me," he says.

Mishleau adds that people are not eager to talk about the subject, not even ministers who preach against gays or those who earn a living leading "ex-gay" organizations.

Mishleau took an interest in the "ex-gay" issue a couple of years ago when he attended an annual Creating Change conference organized by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. He heard from two women associated with PFLAG who infiltrated an "ex-gay" work- shop and saw the deep roots of homophobia. The women recounted the story of a mother at the conference who thought her son was better off dead after a car accident than alive but gay.

"I thought, this is something that needs to be talked about more in the gay community," Mishleau says.

As he interviews people, Mishleau explores the language they use, finding that people generally don't use "ex-gay" to define or identify themselves.

And he explores their politics, finding that "not every person who falls in the ex- gay community is holding up a picket sign and telling you, 'You are going to hell.' "

Mishleau's KickStarter.com crowd-funding campaign, Examining the Ex-Gay Com- munity: One Trip at a Time, had more than 40 backers as of May 8 and had generated more than \$900.

The funding, he says, will help him on his after-college adventure, traveling to Indiana, New York, Texas and Tennessee to

conduct interviews.

Written by Lisa Neff.