



Homophobia at “Hell House”

LITERALLY DEMONIZING LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL AND
TRANSGENDER YOUTH

By Sarah Kennedy and Jason Cianciotto

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute

INTRODUCTION

Many people enjoy a good scare on Halloween, but what about a scare explicitly targeting youth with messages that fuel bigotry and homophobia?

This Halloween season, an estimated 1.6 million people,¹ many of them children as young as 10 years old,² will go to “Hell Houses,” religious alternatives to traditional haunted houses designed to scare youth into a “sin-free life.” Operated primarily by evangelical Christian church youth groups, Hell House tour guides dress like demons and bring participants to rooms where youth depict scripted scenes of damnation for a variety of “sins,” including homosexuality. At the end of the tour, participants are brought to a room where an actor portraying Jesus Christ shares a message of salvation, with some churches claiming a 33 percent “salvation rate.”³

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Religion-based haunted houses began at Rev. Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University in the 1970s. However, Hell Houses did not become a nationwide phenomenon until after 1996, when Rev. Keenan Roberts began selling kits to churches all over the world.⁴ Today these kits sell for \$299 and include a script, instruction manual for constructing the Hell House, and CD with sound effects.⁵ Roberts claims that he has distributed “Hell House Kits” to 800 churches across the US and 18 countries.⁶ Some churches report that their Hell Houses receive 12,000 visitors per year^{7,8} and employ casts and crews of 300 student volunteers.⁹

The growing popularity of Hell Houses has led to coverage from mainstream media outlets such as the *New York Times*,¹⁰ *USA Today*¹¹ and *U.S. News & World Report*.¹² In their articles, some commentators and religious leaders have questioned the use of fear and anti-gay theater to proselytize to teenagers. For example, the Rev. Eileen Linder, a Presbyterian pastor with the National Council of Churches, says Hell Houses “[use] the banner of Christianity to advance their own ideological perspective.... In what way is this the good news of Jesus? ...It



Rev. Keenan Roberts, who sells Hell House kits for \$300.
Retrieved October 20, 2006 from <http://www.godestiny.org>

¹ This estimate is based on an average of 2,000 visitors at 800 Hell Houses, which is the number of kits that Rev. Keenan Roberts claims to have distributed. This estimate is likely an undercount given that some churches report up to 12,000 attendees and also does not include the youth volunteers who are cast and crew in the Hell Houses.

² O’Driscoll, P. (1997, October 21). Churches offer hellish message for Halloween. *USA Today*. p. 3A.

³ New Destiny Christian Center. (2006). Hell House outreach kit results. Retrieved October 25, 2006, from http://www.godestiny.org/hell_house/HH_kitResults.cfm.

⁴ Casstevens, D. (2006, October 21). Let there be fright. *Star-Telegram*. Retrieved October 23, 2006, from <http://www.dfw.com/mld/dfw/15815494.htm>.

⁵ New Destiny Christian Center. (2006). Hell House outreach kit. Retrieved October 18, 2006, from http://www.godestiny.org/hell_house/HH_kit.cfm.

⁶ Casstevens, D. (2006, October 21).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Harvey, D. (2001, October). Hell House. *Variety*. 384(7): 39.

⁹ Yardley, J. (1999, October 29). Church’s haunted house draws fire. *The New York Times*. p. A20.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Roebuck, K. (1998, November 2). Modern morality plays. *U.S. News & World Report*.

misses the mark by any standard of Christian education, pastoral care and outreach.”¹³

However, important questions about exposing youth and children to gory portrayals of contentious social issues have hardly been raised. This is particularly problematic for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth who, according to a growing body of research, are victims of epidemic harassment and violence in schools at the hands of their peers. Are Hell House scenes that expose impressionable youth to the literal demonization of their LGBT peers contributing to this problem? What impact do Hell Houses have on Christian youth who may be struggling with their sexual orientation or gender identity?

Are Hell House scenes that expose impressionable youth and children to the literal demonization of their LGBT peers contributing to anti-LGBT harassment and violence?

ANTI-LGBT SCENES IN “HELL HOUSE”

One scene described on the Hell House Web site depicts a demon — Hell House’s tour guide — and an “angel of the Lord” arguing over a young lesbian’s sexuality. The demon tells the character Jamie that God “made” her a lesbian, and because of conflict over her sexual orientation, Jamie commits suicide.¹⁴ The Hell House kit describes this scene as “captur[ing] an incredibly compelling exposé that unmask[s] the ‘born-gay’ lie.”¹⁵ This is consistent with the message of “ex-gay” organizations, who have recently invested in programs specifically designed to reach out to youth with the message that they can change their sexual orientation through some combination of “therapy” and religious conversion.¹⁶

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Another scene portrays a marriage between two men. The script calls for a young heterosexual married couple to act out this scene. “The wife dons masculine make-up for the necessary male look,” the Hell House Web site instructs.¹⁷ The demon performing the ceremony harasses them during their vows, asking, “Do you solemnly swear to never believe that you’re normal?” The demon also pronounces that the couple is “burning in a repulsive lust for one another, deceived by the world that they’ve been born gay, [and] are joining their deeply confused lives in this deeply nauseating matrimony.”¹⁸ The Hell House Web site explains to potential buyers that purchasing this script “will

¹³ Casstevens, D. (2006, October 21).

¹⁴ New Destiny Christian Center. (2006). Gay/Lesbian Suicide Scene Package. Retrieved October 25, 2006, from http://www.godestiny.org/hell_house/HH_resources_scenes.cfm?p_id=2.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See: Cianciotto, J. & Cahill, S. (2006). *Youth in the crosshairs: The third wave of ex-gay activism*. National Gay & Lesbian Task Force. Retrieved March 30, 2006, from <http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/crosshairs.pdf>.

¹⁷ New Destiny Christian Center. (2006). Hell House Resources — Gay Wedding Scene Package. Retrieved October 25, 2006, from http://www.godestiny.org/hell_house/HH_resources_scenes.cfm?p_id=6.

¹⁸ Dawkins, R. (2006). Root of all evil?, from clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-cZGGD5grkQ>

give you another powerful weapon in your arsenal against the homosexual stronghold and the born-gay deception.”¹⁹

Another room is a mock emergency room, where one of the men from the wedding scene is on his deathbed. He cries out that he does not want to die and go to hell. “This is Steve,” the demon says. “He thought his homosexual lifestyle was everything a real man could want, but now he’s dying of AIDS.”²⁰ Toward the end of the Hell House tour, participants are led through “hell,” where Steve is writhing in pain among other “sinners.” The demon laughs maniacally at Steve, shouting “AIDS! You fool! Ha ha!” over and over again as he stresses that Steve is separated from God forever.²¹

BEYOND HOMOPHOBIA: A SAMPLE OF ADDITIONAL SCENES IN HELL HOUSE

Former presidential candidate and anti-LGBT leader Alan Keyes recently said that abortion and homosexuality are “one and the same,”²² an opinion reflected in the Hell House script. One scene focuses on a young girl who has taken RU-486, an “abortion pill,” and is hemorrhaging.²³ The script calls for props, including “pieces of meat placed in a glass bowl to look like pieces of a baby” and a vacuum to “remove the final pieces of her child.”²⁴ The volunteer actors portraying doctors and nurses shout “You killed your baby!” at the girl before she dies. This scene is an example of the misinformation about important women’s health issues to which youth are being exposed by the Hell House phenomenon.

According to the Guttmacher Institute, the rate of death for women receiving an abortion during the first eight weeks of pregnancy is one in a million.²⁵ In fact, a recent article published in the *American Journal of Forensic Medicine & Pathology* reports that the risk of death associated with childbirth is nearly 10 times higher than the risk associated with all abortions.²⁶ According to Ellen Brillant of Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains, Hell Houses have a “skewed moral message.” She says the operators of Hell

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Photo retrieved October 25, 2006:
<http://www.monsterzine.com/200210/images/hellhouse.jpg>

¹⁹ New Destiny Christian Center. (2006).

²⁰ Stuart, J. (2002, July 23). Bigotry and brimstone: A new documentary takes us inside Hell House, a Halloween creep show designed to scare kids away from “sins” like homosexuality. *The Advocate*. (868): 61.

²¹ Dawkins, R. (2006).

²² Woodard, R. (2006, October 17). Speakers rally against abortion, gay marriage. *Rapid City Journal*. Retrieved October 24, 2006, from <http://www.rapidcityjournal.com/articles/2006/10/17/news/local/news01a.txt>.

²³ Harvey, D. (2001, October). p. 39.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 39.

²⁵ Alan Guttmacher Institute. (2005). Facts in Brief: Induced Abortion in the United States. http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_induced_abortion.pdf.

²⁶ Christiansen, L. & Collins, K. (2006). Pregnancy-associated deaths: A 15-year retrospective study and overall review of maternal pathophysiology. *American Journal of Forensic Medicine & Pathology*, 27(1). Cited in Planned Parenthood. (2006). Abortion after the first trimester. Retrieved October 25, 2006, from <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/news-articles-press/abortion-after-the-first-trimester.htm>.

Houses are “extremists [who] needlessly terrify teens with misinformation.”²⁷

Another Hell House scene depicts a teenage girl attending her first rave. She unknowingly takes a “date rape drug” and a young man rapes her.²⁸ Some Hell Houses alternate the rave date rape with a scene where a young girl is raped by her father. In both cases, after being victimized, the girl commits suicide and goes to hell.²⁹ Available information about both versions mentions nothing about the rapists being punished or going to hell, while the already-victimized girls are sent to hell to be punished for eternity.

HELL HOUSES PUT LGBT YOUTH AT GREATER RISK

The violence and gore in Hell House scenes may be why one church in New Jersey advertises on its Web site that its production “may cause emotional or psychological trauma.”³⁰ Rev. Tim Ferguson, who produces a Hell House with his Texas congregation, says the violent graphic scenes are needed in order to get teenagers to pay attention to the message that “there are consequences to [the behaviors acted out]; a real place called hell.”³¹ Though churches may believe their Hell Houses are helping youth, research indicates that they may actually be contributing to the harassment and violence experienced by LGBT youth on a daily basis.

For example, a 2001 study published in the *Journal of Psychology* found that “the belief in an active Satan [is] directly related to intolerance toward gay men and lesbians.”³² Given that all of the gay and lesbian characters in Hell House scenes are condemned to hell by Satan and his demons, this research raises serious questions about the impact of Hell House on impressionable youth. The message of Hell House may foster or reinforce intolerance toward LGBT youth, who research shows already suffer from social stigma that makes them more susceptible to violent attacks, verbal harassment, depression and suicide.³³

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ANTI-LGBT HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS

A recent national survey of LGBT youth conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that 90 percent of LGBT youth experienced verbal or physical harassment or verbal assault in the past year.³⁴ For

²⁷ O’Driscoll, P. (1997, October 21).

²⁸ Stuart, J. (2002, July 23). p. 61.

²⁹ Yardley, J. (1999, October 29).

³⁰ Hell House New Jersey. (2006). Hell House: You’re already there. Retrieved October 18, 2006, from <http://www.hellhouse.4t.com/hellhouse/HHNJDISCLAIMER.htm>.

³¹ Yardley, J. (1999, October 29).

³² Wilson, K. & Huff, J. (2001). Scaling Satan. *Journal of Psychology*, 135(3) p. 293.

³³ Kitts, R. (2005). Gay adolescents and suicide: Understanding the association. *Adolescence*, 40(159). p. 621.

³⁴ Harris Interactive & GLSEN (2005). *From teasing to torment: School climate in America - a survey of students and teachers*. Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. Retrieved September 6, 2006, from http://www.glsen.org/binary-data/GLSEN_ATTACHMENTS/file/500-1.pdf p. 7.

example, a report by Human Rights Watch includes the account of one high school senior who had been harassed at school since first grade “because [he] was different” and then “because [he] was gay.” He reported that after he came out of the closet, other students’ aggression toward him got worse: “It was like I had a death wish or something. I was pushed around, thrown into lockers. It was just constant. Everybody was always harassing me.”³⁵ According to the Safe Schools Coalition, one seventh-grade boy was harassed daily at school and told that “queers burn in hell.”³⁶

LGBT students report receiving hate mail in their lockers, that their grades have slipped due to anti-gay harassment, and that they have even had their lives threatened by peers at school.³⁷ For example, more than 40 percent of the LGBT youth served at the Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth in New York City have suffered violence because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.³⁸ Additionally, research conducted by the Massachusetts Department of Education found that self-identified LGBT high school students were almost five times as likely as heterosexual students to have missed school out of fear for their safety.³⁹

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IMPACT OF ANTI-LGBT HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE

A study published in *The American Journal of Public Health* found that lesbian, gay, bisexual and questioning youth who experienced three or more incidents of harassment within the preceding year were more likely to engage in behaviors that put their health at risk (including substance abuse and suicide attempts) at a higher rate than their heterosexual peers who were similarly harassed.⁴⁰ Anti-LGBT rhetoric from the religious right can also have a powerful effect on young people’s emotional well-being. When he was 16 years old, gay high school student Bobby Griffith wrote in his journal:

I can’t let anyone find out that I’m not straight. It would be so humiliating. My friends would hate me. They might even want to beat me up. And my family? They’ve said they hate gays, and even God hates gays, too. Gays are bad, and God sends bad people to hell. It really scares me when they talk that way because now they are talking about me.⁴¹

³⁵ Bochenek, M. & Brown, A. W. (2001). *Hatred in the hallways: Violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students in U.S. schools* [Electronic version]. New York. Retrieved October 25, 2006, from <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/uslgbt/toc.htm>.

³⁶ Safe Schools Coalition. (2003). Quick facts on sexual minority youth.

³⁷ Pederson, S. (2006, March 6). Students share experiences of harassment, bullying with Lt. Gov. Pederson. *US Fed News Service, Including US State News*. Retrieved October 24, 2006, from <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=995727341&sid=1&Fmt=3&clientId=77476&RQT=309&VName=PQD>.

³⁸ Hetrick, E. S. & Martin, A. D. (1987). Developmental issues and their resolution for gay and lesbian adolescents. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 14(1/2). Cited in Morrow, D. (2004). Social work practice with gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender adolescents. *Families in Society*, 85(1): 95.

³⁹ Massachusetts Department of Education. (1999). *Massachusetts high school students and sexual orientation results of the 1999 youth risk behavior survey* [Electronic version].

⁴⁰ Russell, S. T., Franz, B. T. & Driscoll, A. K. (2001). Same-sex romantic attraction and experiences of violence in adolescence. *American Journal of Public Health*, 91(6).

⁴¹ Baker, J. (2002). *How homophobia hurts children; nurturing diversity at home, at school, and in the community*. New York: Harrington Park Press. p. 12.

In another journal entry Griffith wrote, “Am I going to hell? That’s the gnawing question that’s always drilling little holes in the back of my mind. Please don’t send me to hell. I’m really not that bad, am I?”⁴² Four years later, Griffith committed suicide by jumping off a bridge. His mother later realized that her efforts to save her gay son from “hell” were a factor in his suicide.⁴³

Research has found that more than one-third of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth attempt suicide before the age of 17, and nearly 75 percent of those who attempt suicide cite their sexual orientation as the most significant factor in the decision to end their life.⁴⁴ In fact, more than 15 different studies conducted within the last 20 years have consistently found significantly higher rates of suicide attempts among lesbian, gay and bisexual adolescents.⁴⁵

What factors cause so many youth to attempt suicide? The results of a survey of LGBT adults that asked about their childhood experiences found that “extremist anti-gay attitudes and practices inevitably harm homosexual youth, making them feel that something must be fundamentally wrong with who they are.”⁴⁶

ETHICAL AND MORAL CONCERNS ABOUT HELL HOUSES

According to Carol West, pastor of Fort Worth, Colorado’s Celebration Community Church, Hell Houses are “teaching bigotry and prejudice through fear. I like to think their intent is good, but they’re doing a lot of bad things to marginalize others.”⁴⁷ However, the majority of media coverage has largely ignored the moral and ethical ramifications of Hell Houses’ fear-based techniques and anti-LGBT messages.

Religious studies scholar Paul Giurlanda poses an important question: “If the church’s teaching is internalized [by a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender youth], what kind of a life is he or she likely to have? This youth must recognize that every sexual impulse he or she has is dangerous and evil...”⁴⁸

Despite these ethical and moral concerns, many religious leaders at churches that sponsor Hell Houses really believe that they are positively affecting youth by saving them from “hell.” Rev. Keenan Roberts, the pastor whose church sells Hell House kits, believes scaring youth into living in accordance with his church’s teachings is in their best interest:

“Am I going to hell?
Please don't send me to
hell. I'm really not that
bad, am I?”
—Bobby Griffith, a gay
teen who later committed
suicide.

⁴² Cited in Giurlanda, P. (1993, May 8). What about our church's children? *America*. 168(16): 12.

⁴³ Baker, J. (2002). p. 12.

⁴⁴ Hammelman, T. (1993). Gay and lesbian youth: Contributing factors to serious attempts or considerations of suicide. *The Journal of Gay & Lesbian Psychotherapy*, 2(1); Morrison, L. L. & L'Heureux, J. (2001). Suicide and gay/lesbian/bisexual youth: Implications for clinicians. *Journal of Adolescence*, 24. pp. 39–40.

⁴⁵ Kitts, R. (2005). pp. 623–624.

⁴⁶ Baker, J. (2002). p. 6.

⁴⁷ Casstevens, D. (2006, October 21).

⁴⁸ Giurlanda, P. (1993, May 8). p. 13.

I would like for their [12 year olds'] lives to be changed, no matter what. I would rather [have] them understand that hell is a place they absolutely would not want to go. I would rather reach them at 12 than not reach them... and have them live in sin.⁴⁹

Additionally, Mark Bradford, who runs a Hell House with his wife Anna in Texas, says he does not find the message of Hell House controversial at all, while Anna insists that the couple just wants to get their message out to the teenagers.⁵⁰ John Barnes, who works with a church in northern Colorado to produce a Hell House, echoes these ideas. “We’re not doing it to condemn anything,” Barnes says. “The underlying tone is to preach Jesus.”⁵¹

“Hell Houses are teaching bigotry and prejudice through fear.”
—Pastor Carol West

These beliefs perpetuate the notion that youth cannot be simultaneously Christian and LGBT, an idea that is not only damaging but false. Like Pastor Carol West, many religious leaders and organizations have condemned the message of Hell House. For example, the Rev. Russell Baker, an associate pastor of a Colorado United Methodist Church, has dismissed Hell Houses as “simplistic theology” that is not “true Christianity.”⁵² With clear implications for the Hell House message, the Council of Bishops, Elders and Christian Leaders, which represents organizations and congregations that reach 98 million Americans, has publicly stated that they are “united in [their] rejection of all forms of fear-based religion” and refuse to “cooperate with or support political or religious leaders who caricature and condemn the lives of gays and lesbians.”⁵³

CONCLUSION

The message of Hell House literally demonizes LGBT youth, fueling the harassment and violence many experience on a daily basis. Hell House also reinforces the false notion that youth cannot be both LGBT and Christian, causing conflict that, as was the case for Bobby Griffith, may lead to depression and even suicide. Despite these concerns, the popularity of the Hell House phenomenon is likely to grow. Parents should be aware of the dangerous message of Hell House, and religious leaders who youth trust should be held accountable for the moral and ethical questions these programs raise.

Hell Houses perpetuate the idea that youth cannot be Christian and LGBT, which is not only damaging, but also false.

Fortunately, there are a large number of Christian churches and congregations actively embracing LGBT people. In fact, the Institute for Welcoming Resources (IWR), a program of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, is a national ecumenical collaboration of the Welcoming Church Movement that represents congregations that include over two million

⁴⁹ Dawkins, R. (2006).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ England, D. (2006, October 20). The passion of the frights. *The Tribune*. Retrieved October 20, 2006, from <http://www.greeleytrib.com/article/20061020/ENTERTAIN/110200142>.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

members. On the IWR Web site, LGBT Christians, including youth, can access a searchable database to locate a welcoming congregation in their community.⁵⁴ According to the Rev. Rebecca Voelkel, IWR program director, “At thousands of welcoming congregations, LGBT youth around the country can worship free from the judgment and damnation that is the core message of Hell House.”⁵⁵

About the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

The mission of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is to build the political power of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community from the ground up. We do this by training activists, organizing broad-based campaigns to defeat anti-LGBT referenda and advance pro-LGBT legislation, and building the organizational capacity of our movement. Our Policy Institute, the movement’s premier think tank, provides research and policy analysis to support the struggle for complete equality and to counter right-wing lies. As part of a broader social justice movement, we work to create a nation that respects the diversity of human expression and identity and creates opportunity for all. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., we also have offices in New York City, Los Angeles, Miami, Minneapolis and Cambridge. Our Web site is www.theTaskForce.org.

⁵⁴ More information about the Institute for Welcoming Resources is available at www.welcomingresources.org.

⁵⁵ Personal communication with Rebecca Voelkel, program director of the Institute for Welcoming Resources.