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Dr. James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, [died Thursday at 89](#). For conservative Christians, he was a champion of "family values." For LGBTQ+ people like me, his legacy was one of shame, rejection and the lie that we needed to be "cured."

His radio show and books reached millions, and his political influence stretched from Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump. Dobson was the man who dared a generation of parents to discipline strong-willed children and to guard their homes against what he claimed were corrupting cultural influences, especially homosexuality.

Dobson once said, "The sin of homosexual behavior, like all sins, can be forgiven and healed by the grace revealed in the life and death of Christ. All sexual sin affects the human personality like no other sin, for sexual issues run deep in our character, and change is slow and uphill — but is possible nonetheless."

For parents listening to Dobson in their minivans, for youth pastors playing his cassette tapes for their students, that wasn't just commentary — it was a license to treat queer people as dangerous and sexuality as something that needed to, and must be, changed.

I know, because I was one of those queer kids sitting in the audience.

Determined to prove his belief that homosexuality could be "healed," Dobson in 1995 hired John Paulk, an "ex-gay" man, to lead Focus on the Family's Homosexuality and Gender Division. Alongside his wife, Anne, an "ex-gay" herself, Paulk became the face of Dobson's agenda.

Paulk went on to launch Love Won Out in 1998, a traveling conference series that toured the country and regularly drew thousands. Parents were taught to look for "warning signs" in their kids. Testimonies from so-called "ex-gays" described walking away from homosexuality like a bad habit. And at the center of it all stood the Paulks, smiling from the cover of Newsweek, appearing on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" and standing onstage as the movement's poster family — proof that change was possible.

For teenagers like me in the audience, those conferences planted shame deep in our hearts and convinced us God could not love us as we were. I would spend eight years in conversion therapy, chasing a false promise that only deepened my shame.

Years later, Paulk [publicly came out as gay](#) and began speaking openly, most notably in the Netflix documentary [Pray Away](#), about the damage caused by the "ex-gay" movement, including the harm he himself had perpetrated.

"I lied to the people I preached to, but I was lying to myself the most. I had become brainwashed by the false narrative that sexual orientation was changeable when it was not. Every headline that proclaimed me 'cured' drove me deeper into despair, because I knew the truth hadn't budged," Paulk told me on Thursday evening, the day Dobson died.

"I remember nights alone in hotel rooms before a conference, curled on the floor, sobbing until I vomited. Minutes later, I'd put on a suit, step onstage and tell the crowd exactly what they came to hear. That split, between the man on the stage and the man on the hotel room floor, nearly destroyed me."

In the wake of Dobson's death, Paulk says, "Conversion therapy didn't make me straight. It made me ashamed, hollow and nearly hopeless. When I read that James Dobson is being remembered as a man who cared about families, I think instead about the families torn apart by his message. Parents were taught to fear their own children. Spouses trapped in marriages built on self-denial. Young people who looked at me, the smiling 'success story' on the magazine cover, walked away believing they were broken beyond repair because they couldn't replicate my lie."

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## **From Focus on the Family to Exodus International**

Dobson and Focus on the Family eventually handed the Love Won Out brand to Exodus International, the umbrella network for "ex-gay" ministries across the world, in 2003. Exodus carried the torch until 2013, when its president, Alan Chambers, admitted publicly that conversion therapy did not work and apologized for the harm it caused. [The organization closed its doors soon after.](#)

This might sound like the end of the story, but it wasn't.

According to [a 2023 report by The Trevor Project](#), conversion therapy is still being practiced today by more than 1,300 practitioners in 48 states. An estimated 700,000 people in the United States alone have undergone conversion therapy, and their

data shows that LGBTQ+ youth subjected to it are more than twice as likely to attempt suicide. In other words, the pipeline Dobson helped build is still running, causing irreparable harm to a new generation of young queer people.

Organizations like the [Changed Movement](#) and the [Restored Hope Network](#), run by Anne Edwards, John Paulk's ex-wife, no longer promise to make gay people straight. Instead, they cloak the same harmful ideology in the language of "sexual integrity" and "biblical discipleship" and teach queer people that the only godly paths are celibacy or straight marriage.

These groups operate strategically within religious exemptions that shield them from state conversion therapy bans. By framing their work as spiritual guidance rather than medical treatment, they exploit a loophole that allows them to continue unchecked, even in states where conversion therapy is technically illegal.

### **The legacy we remember**

Conservatives mourning Dobson this week will call him a defender of the family. Franklin Graham praised him as someone who "stood for morality and Biblical values." Others say his impact will echo for generations.

They're not wrong.

But for LGBTQ+ people like me, his legacy means broken families, rejection and years lost to self-hatred.

As John Paulk put it, "Dobson's empire baptized cruelty and called it love. That is his true legacy."

I do not celebrate James Dobson's death. But I will not mourn him the way his followers do. His influence shaped American evangelicalism for nearly half a century, and for LGBTQ+ people, that influence was beyond toxic — it was tragic.

His death doesn't heal the lives or families torn apart by his teachings. And it doesn't absolve him of the shame and hatred he spread in the name of Christian love.

While some call him a pioneer of the faith, others of us will carry scars for the rest of our lives because of the vision he preached. Our work now is to break that cycle so queer kids never again believe their existence is a mistake. That they would know instead that their sexuality is not something broken that needs to be fixed and that

they are beloved, just as they are. They deserve better than the legacy James Dobson leaves behind.

As Paulk reflected, "James Dobson has died. But we survived."