

What would Nathan do?

The mysterious death of rural gay activist Nathan Christoffersen has had an unexpected effect: bridging the gap between gay and antigay. Could Nathan's life and death offer gay activists a path to reaching religious fundamentalists?

Part 2 of a special *Advocate* investigation

By John Caldwell


Photographed by Alan Traeger for *The Advocate*

AT DAWN ON DECEMBER 16, 28-year-old gay activist Nathan Christoffersen died mysteriously on the stoop of his parents' house in rural Madera, Calif. In Nathan's obituary, his family requested donations to an "ex-gay" group; at his funeral, a parade of speakers talked about Nathan's "struggles" and "conflicts" but never mentioned that he was gay.

Molly McKay, one of Nathan's several gay and lesbian friends who attended the funeral, complained, "It felt like people were mourning a life that had been led the wrong way." Nathan's fundamentalist Christian dad, Al, offered a different perspective. "Look," he told *The Advocate*, "I don't have a problem with gay people. I believe in my heart that God loves everybody." He added, "I'm sorry that people were upset by the funeral. Nobody knows the pain that we feel. We wanted to honor our son for whom we knew him to be."

Al Christoffersen is now exploring new ways to honor his son's life—in all respects. He's talking about helping young gay people overcome stigma. He's hoping to meet with Nathan's gay friends. Al has become part of what some gay religious advocates call "the movable middle": Christians who are somewhere along the bridge to full acceptance.

Nathan Christoffersen grew up immersed in his family's Christian fundamentalism. His rural California community differed from small towns in the South or Midwest chiefly in its particular crops and the accent of its population; the bedrock of faith was no different. Christoffersen was born in Fresno, a city of about half a million people and the metropolitan center of California's San Joaquin Valley, the state's agricultural heart. But he grew up in Madera, a farming community of around 50,000 people 20 miles north of Fresno where thick early-morning fog blankets seemingly endless stretches of almond orchards and dairy ►



■ Barbara and Al Christoffersen in their living room holding a photo of their son, Nathan, with the inscription "If the son has set you free you shall be freed indeed" —John 8:36

One night Al found Nathan passed out on the couch with a bottle of sleeping pills in his hand. He had taken 12. "He wasn't trying to kill himself," Al says. "That was common. He had taken so many that he had to take a lot to make them work." About a year before Nathan's death Al and Barbara rushed their son to the hospital, where two complete detoxes were performed. "He wasn't so much abusing Vicodin, but he'd been on it for so long that his organs were shutting down," Al says. "That scared him. We saw some [improvement] for a while."

By the summer of 2005, Nathan was more focused and had found a new purpose. Equality California field director Molly McKay first met Nathan after he signed up to help out with the gay rights group last summer. "I was enchanted," McKay says. "He was so friendly and open and inquisitive. He was a delight. I thought, *This is a person that has a lot of potential. This person is a leader.*"

Soon Christoffersen was the Equality California chapter leader for Madera County and was talking about his activism in terms of a career. But it wasn't easy for him, McKay says. "I mailed a banner and some [Equality California] T-shirts to his home, and he got in trouble with his family," she says. "He said his parents were really upset. It was clearly very painful for him. He loved his family."

Al Christoffersen says he didn't agree with the work his son was doing for Equality California but insists he didn't try to stop him. "To be honest, we don't know too much about his involvement in this," he says. "Nathan didn't share it with us. But we support our kids in whatever they do. We went around and around about the marriage issue, but more joking than anything. We really didn't fight with each other."

Nathan's friends, however, say his parents were still giving him grief over his sexuality. He threatened to skip the family Christmas because his parents wouldn't let him "be who he really was," says Scott, who, as the Equality California chapter leader for Fresno County, worked a lot with Nathan.

But Nathan didn't live until Christmas. And that, Al Christoffersen says, was God's will. "Nathan could have gone on and have been a real asset to their community," Al says, referring to gays and lesbians. "But you know what? God had a different idea, a different plan."

Candace Chellew-Hodge, assistant pastor at Garden of Grace United Church in Columbia, S.C., talks about people like Al as members of the "movable middle." They've seen God's grace in their gay family members or friends, says Chellew-Hodge, 40, who lives with her partner of five years, Wanda. "What you have to do is keep showing [people like Al] that grace."

Chellew-Hodge is the youngest of five kids born to a Southern Baptist preacher. Her parents divorced when she was 9, and she grew up with her mother. "I came out to her when I was 16, and she said, 'It might be a phase, don't do anything about it,'" Chellew-Hodge remembers. "I didn't—until I fell in love with my first girlfriend when I was 18. I told her, 'Mom, it's not a phase.' She and I had the 'Bible talk.' She said, 'I think it's wrong, but you're my daughter and I love you."



■ Candace Chellew-Hodge

You'll always be welcome in my house.'"

But family reunions still aren't easy for Chellew-Hodge. She has two sisters and two brothers, and three of the siblings are conservative Republicans and fundamentalist Christians who speak openly against LGBT equality. "We simply don't talk politics anymore because it became too stressful," she says. "[But] they all are very accepting, and they all think Wanda is wonderful. So the family is cool, within its limits."

Political or not, "what needs to happen to the movable middle is dialogue," adds Chellew-Hodge. "Let them speak their language and calmly defend yourself."

To help others with that religion-based dialogue—among family or friends, or just in their own mind—Chellew-Hodge founded Whosoever.org, an online magazine for gay and lesbian Christians celebrating its 10-year anniversary this summer. "There's fear on both sides, especially for us," she says. "How many times have you been run into the ground? You don't want to walk into a situation where that is going to happen again."

It's Sunday morning at the University Vineyard church about a month after Christoffersen's funeral. A Christian pop group churns out song after song about the greatness and the glory of God's love. About 200 congregants of all ages, most dressed in jeans and flannel, sway side to side with arms outstretched while standing among neat rows of blue upholstered stacking chairs.

Pastor Ray Duran takes the stage wearing a colorful sweater and a small headset microphone. He sermonizes about the importance of serving God in everyday life. "If you are doing something you feel you were created to do, then you are serving the Lord," Duran says, gesturing toward the heavens. "Offer that up as worship to God."

In the months before his death—and in some ways, in the months after—Nathan Christoffersen may have finally found what he was created to do. Most congregants at University Vineyard probably wouldn't see it as God's work, but his father might. Because now God is calling to Al Christoffersen, has given him an idea. God is telling him to help young people who are taunted and bullied, like his own son was in school.

"I might start a thing called the Nathan Foundation," he says. "I'm really sick of the way people treat people because they are different. I know a number of kids who are into the arts, and they are constantly picked on. These kids need to know that it's OK to be who they are." He carefully avoids saying the word "gay" until prompted: Doesn't he mean gay kids? Yes, he says, "probably the biggest share of the people who would come to us would be gay."

Al Christoffersen is not only hoping to speak to McKay and Scott about their upset over the funeral, he seems ready to accept the work that they are doing. "If they get their agenda done, great," he says. "I'm glad."

Says McKay: "If there's nothing more than you have a common love for a human being, that's where hope lives. It terrifies me to think of picking up the phone and calling Al. But maybe I owe it him. Maybe I owe it to Nathan. We've got to be willing to take that leap of faith and reach out and say, 'I loved Nathan too.'"

McKay too sees her work in religious terms. "My job is convincing people that supporting gay people is the right thing to do," she says. "It's what Nathan was doing. It's what Jesus would do." ■

Find Part 1 of this investigation by clicking on the March 14 issue at http://www.advocate.com/issuearchives_w.asp