

Parents speak out: Our lives were shattered by a baseball bat

by Pat and Wally Kutteles
Special to Q-Notes

[This essay is reprinted from Hostile Climate 2000, published by People for the American Way. Pat and Wally Kutteles are the parents of Pfc. Barry Winchell, who was slain in his Army barracks in 1999.]

A year ago, we were living peacefully and quietly in Kansas City, Missouri. We had three wonderful sons. Our son Barry was a bright young man with a promising career in the United States Army. Barry was a good kid, and he had become a good, kind and honest man.

By the Army's own measures, Barry was an outstanding soldier. Already, the Army had awarded him a number of medals. He was the best .50-caliber gunner in his company and his fellow soldiers referred to him as "Top Gun." Barry's goal was to become the best helicopter pilot in the Army. We grieve that

we will never get to see Barry fulfill the promise of his youth.

In the early morning hours of July 5, 1999, while he slept in his barracks at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, Barry was viciously attacked and killed by a fellow soldier. This soldier, who was supported and encouraged in this crime by another soldier, beat Barry to death with a baseball bat. They killed him, in part, because they thought he was gay.

We both have military connections, including Wally's service in the Korean War. We encouraged Barry's interest in a military career. We were proud that Barry wanted to serve our country. Barry had struggled in school because of a learning disability. We were happy that, in the Army, he had found something in which he excelled.

What we did not know at the time was that the Army our son served so well and so proudly was fostering an atmosphere of hatred that would lead to his murder. A year ago, we did not know our son was being harassed daily by his leaders and fellow soldiers.

Barry knew we loved him. Our children's happiness, not their sexual orientation, is all

that matters to us. If Barry was discovering that he was gay, we know he would have told us when the time was right for him. We have both mentored kids in the past and Pat has worked with troubled teenagers, including gay kids who have been rejected by their parents. This rejection is heartbreaking, and we shared this with all three of our sons as they were growing up. We wanted our sons to know that our love for them is unconditional. If you love your child, whether gay or not, you're going to fight for him. We loved our son very, very much. And

death, it took months for the Army to acknowledge that his murder was motivated by hate. Even in the wake of Barry's murder, the Army has allowed anti-gay harassment to continue.

We are in touch with many soldiers, and they tell us they must endure slurs and threats every day as a condition of serving our country. They are scared, very scared, that they will be the next one who is attacked.

Because Army leaders have not taken responsibility to change this dangerous climate, our family has been forced to take legal action against the Army. We do this reluctantly, as a last resort, because we are afraid that someone else's child is going to be hurt.

We have taken legal action against the Army in the hope that it will help change the hostile climate that exists in the military. We want to see leaders set the example. We want leaders to hold those who harass and assault their fellow soldiers accountable for their actions, rather than letting them act with impunity. We want to see the military truly look out for the well-being of all our nation's men and women in uniform.

We have recently begun to accept invitations to speak at public events, including the Millennium March on Washington for Equality and PrideFest America in Philadelphia. We have decided to accept these invitations, despite having never spoken publicly before, because we wanted to pay tribute to Barry's memory. We wanted to honor him.

We never thought that we would become activists, but we want to do all that we can to ensure that other parents and children do not suffer the pain that we have suffered. We believe that we must work in Barry's memory to repeal the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue, Don't Harass" policy. This destructive law does nothing more than foster prejudice and hatred. It must end. Openly gay men, lesbians and bisexuals must be permitted to serve our country. The policy is a failure and it contributed in no small measure to our son's death.

In the meantime, we will continue to do whatever we can to stop the harassment and violence that continues in the military. It is an uphill battle, but we have seen progress. Recently, as a result of Barry's murder, the Department of Defense began to tell all service members that harassment will not be tolerated. The department conducted a survey that revealed that 80 percent of service members had heard anti-gay speech within the past year. It should not have taken the death of our son for harassment to be addressed. Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, the legal aid organization that has supported our family since Barry's death, has reported a constant rise in anti-gay harassment in the military for the past six years. While the Department of Defense's acknowledgment of harassment is a positive step, we wait to see whether military leaders take the issue seriously.

This has been a devastating year for our family. We miss our son terribly, but we have found solace in the kind words of condolence we have received from thousands of caring people. We truly believe that Barry would want us to continue on the path we have chosen. Every day that we work to protect other parents' children, we honor the memory of our child. ▼



Pfc. Barry Winchell

The Army allowed an atmosphere of hatred toward gay men, lesbians and bisexuals. The Army allowed our son to be murdered.

we want the world to know how much we loved him and were proud of him.

Although the men who murdered Barry have been tried and sentenced, justice has not been served. Yes, we hold those two men responsible for Barry's death. But we hold the US Army responsible, as well. The Army allowed — and even promoted — an atmosphere of hatred toward gay men, lesbians and bisexuals. The Army allowed our son to be murdered. Following Barry's

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