

Fort Lauderdale man has become 'godfather of gay diversity'

By Margo Harakas
Staff Writer

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He was a good kid, a mother's dream -- altar boy, patrol boy, Boy Scout, athlete, senior class president, recipient of his high school's Christian Leadership Award. The middle of seven children in an Irish-Catholic, Detroit family, Brian McNaught's overriding ambition as a small boy was to be God's best friend.

But in 1974, then a 26-year-old Catholic newspaper columnist and cable TV talk show host, McNaught drank a bottle of paint thinner, downed a vial of pills and sat down to die. "I'm going home to God," he thought. He'd be free at last from the pain of pretending to be someone he could not be.

Fortunately, he had second thoughts, paramount among them that he didn't want to hurt his mom and dad.

He rushed himself to a nearby hospital, had his stomach pumped and went home to tell his parents not of his suicide attempt, but that he was gay.

"The world is going to be awful to you," cried his mother, "and there is nothing I can do for you."

His dad, who was head of public relations at General Motors, concluded the problem was hormonal and that McNaught eventually would outgrow it.

Never again, vowed McNaught, would he hide who he is.

A few months ago, in London to address a group of high-powered international investment bankers, McNaught couldn't help reflecting on his good fortune, thinking how impossible it would have been to predict the sweet trajectory of his life from that nether point so many years before.

Today, in a newly built home in Fort Lauderdale, the man The New York Times dubbed "the godfather of gay diversity and sensitivity training," the author of three acclaimed books and five videos, a sought-after speaker who gets \$6,000 plus per appearance, throws an arm over the back of an elegant sofa and exclaims in sheer delight, "I am so happy with my life today."

Hungry for change

McNaught's vow three decades ago unleashed an avalanche of unexpected events.

After delivering news of his sexual orientation to his parents, he set out to enlighten colleagues at his newspaper, The Michigan Catholic. One by one, he took them to lunch and told them he was gay. "My life was perfect -- for two weeks," he says.

McNaught, who had a bachelor's in journalism from Marquette University, was a popular columnist, particularly among the young who were leaving the church in droves. "I was a credible voice for the young, a popular bridge,"

says McNaught. He wrote about hunger and poverty, civil rights, labor leader Cesar Chavez, and, as a conscientious objector, opposition to the Vietnam War.

But a short time after coming out, a religion writer at the Detroit News called. She was doing a story on homosexuals and religion. She had learned that McNaught was founder of a new Detroit chapter of Dignity Inc., a support group for gay Catholics.

Would he agree to an interview?

"On Saturday, the Detroit News quoted me extensively," he says. "On Monday, my editor said, 'We're dropping your column.'" The diocese had received hundreds of phone calls, from readers threatening to cancel subscriptions and businesses threatening to pull ads.

The axing of the column made headlines in Detroit. The story was picked up by The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times and the wire services. TV reporters lined up outside the Catholic paper. Student supporters marched with signs demanding the column be reinstated.

"My parents got obscene phone calls. The editor got obscene calls. We got death threats," recalls McNaught.

Amid the turmoil, McNaught's colleagues drafted a petition objecting to his using the newspaper to further his cause.

Believing "we create hell for each other out of our fear and ignorance," McNaught went on a hunger strike to force the diocese to launch an educational program on sexuality for the clergy. For seven days, he consumed juice, for another 17 he was on water. For 24 days, no solid food passed his lips.

"I was really proud of him," recalls his brother Tom, speaking by phone from Boston. Two years younger, Tom is also gay. "People back then knew who Gandhi and Dorothy Day were, and they respected the tactics of nonviolent civil disobedience. I was very, very impressed with Brian."

Other family members were embarrassed.

On the 24th day, McNaught prevailed. The bishops committed -- in writing -- to educating the clergy. The hunger strike ended. "And that night," says McNaught, "I was fired."

Shortly after, a gay newspaper contacted him about writing a column to be syndicated in 12 gay publications. About the same time, McNaught began receiving requests for speaking engagements.

"The first time I was asked to speak was in a private home to a Bible study class," he says.

The hostess met him at the door saying, "You should know, the lady in the green blazer said she is going to throw up when you walk in the room."

As it turned out, the lady in the green blazer was the last to leave.

On a journey

McNaught began to read everything he could find on sexual orientation and homosexuality. Universities started booking him. He was invited to speak at an annual Episcopalian workshop on sexuality. (Eventually, he'd be made a permanent staff member and be certified as a sexuality educator.) And soon corporations were asking for his help in addressing homophobia in the workplace.

"Every person is on a spiritual journey," says McNaught, 57, who today identifies himself as Buddhist. "How each of us responds to the opportunities life provides us to love and to grow is the story of our journey."

In his presentations, McNaught says, "The most powerful thing I do is tell my story."

The author of *On Being Gay: Thoughts on Family, Faith and Love*; *Gay Issues in the Workplace*; and *Now That I'm Out, What Do I Do* relates his story with warmth, humor and dignity.

He likes to tell of the man who sat next to him on a plane, a high-profile, born-again Christian businessman and recipient of a presidential Thousand Points of Light award. He was from Cobb County, Ga., which McNaught knew had an ordinance declaring homosexuality incompatible with community values. The man and his wife helped finance the opposition to civil rights for homosexuals.

"So, tell me about you," the man said. "Are you married? What do you do for work?"

McNaught responded politely and calmly. He and his partner had been together more than 20 years, he noted. And his work was helping corporations address homophobia in the workplace.

Digesting that information, the man slowly began to probe more. McNaught shared the feelings of fear and isolation that gays and lesbians grow up with. He told of his life, of his devout upbringing, how he was a model child who yearned to be a saint. He explained that while he dated girls throughout his school years, he knew he was different. "The horror of growing up gay," he explained, "is having a secret you don't understand and are afraid to share with family and friends for fear of losing their love and respect."

All that he was advocating, he said, was for a world that was mutually respectful.

As the plane readied for landing, the man declared, "Brian, as sure as I'm sitting here, I believe that God had you sit next to me."

He admitted he had never met a homosexual before. "You put a face on this issue and I won't ever forget that."

What impact the exchange had on the man is unknown. McNaught can only hope.

"What makes Brian the most effective," says Juli Burnell, head of the

counseling center at the University of Dayton, "is that he does a wonderful job of being authentically human."

She's booked McNaught four years in a row. She admits the first appearance raised concern at the Catholic university about possible parent reaction. But the show went on before a standing-room-only crowd without a complaint. "It was truly amazing."

Last year, Burnell had to feed McNaught's presentation into three overflow rooms to accommodate the 1,300 people who showed up. That on a campus with an enrollment of only 6,700.

"I've heard lots of stories from students, the faculty and administration, about how hearing Brian has been life changing," says Burnell.

Students tell of their surprise to learn homosexuality is not a choice and that they found Brian no different from them or their parents.

One boy observed that he never thought it a big deal when a friend said, "That's so gay."

But now, he noted, "I just can't tolerate it." And he challenges anyone who uses that or similar phrases.

"The other thing that is so effective about Brian," says Burnell, "he allows people to be where they are. A lot of students were disarmed in the beginning by his saying, 'I'm not here to change your values ... You can still be my ally if you believe that every person deserves to live to their full potential.'"

The response is much the same in the corporate world. Since 1998, McNaught has conducted annual half-day workshops for the Chubb Group of Insurance Companies. "The feedback has been outstanding," says Kathy Marvel, Chubb's chief diversity officer. "People have e-mailed me and indicated that there has never been a class as effective as this."

McNaught's personal approach changes entirely the way people look at gay issues, says Marvel. "He's an extremely moving and effective speaker."

'Love yourself'

McNaught's message is be who you are and love yourself and only then will you realize your full potential. "When I die," he tells his audiences, "I imagine God will say to me, 'Did you sing the song I taught you?'"

Even for McNaught, it's taken years of work -- of searching, reading and therapy. Initially after coming out, he found himself still seeking the approval of others. His song then was: "I'm Brian. I'm gay. Won't you accept me today?"

Now it's: "I'm Brian. I'm gay. I'm God's gift to you today."

The shift came, he says, when "I started to understand I was the only one who can give me permission to be me."

The climate for homosexual, bisexual and transgender people is friendlier

today than when McNaught began his journey.

"There is a light at the end of the tunnel," he says. "Society is more sophisticated about sexual orientation."

Hostility still exists, and many contend the recent elections demonstrate how vehement the opposition remains.

Nevertheless, McNaught is optimistic.

"I know we lost 11 state referenda on gay marriage, but the majority [of Americans] support gay people having the same rights that marriage gives you," he says.

Will we reach a point where gays and lesbians no longer face bigotry and bias? No, says McNaught. After all, we still have anti-Semitism and racism.

"But will we get to the day we will have a more even playing field? Yes," he says confidently.

Sweeping changes already are seen in many workplaces. Gays and lesbians are recruited and provided partner benefits "because they're seen as the best and the brightest. And if you want to retain them, you have to provide a workplace where they feel safe and valued."

McNaught, weary of spending three weeks out of every month on the road, is cutting back on workshops and speaking engagements and is promoting a self-published novel for the 18-and-over crowd.

He and his partner of 29 years, Ray Struble, split their time between Fort Lauderdale and Provincetown, Mass. The couple (they were married two years ago in Canada) were attracted to the area by the cultural diversity.

"Fort Lauderdale offered the possibility of being surrounded with people who would support us in our journey," he says.

While he didn't become, as he hoped for in college, the religion editor of The New York Times, he's pleased the way his life has evolved.

"I feel so blessed that I've been used as a channel of peace for this issue."

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