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“Fabulous People” Column

Jim Struve: Reclaiming the Body

Contributed by staff writer: JoSelle Vanderhooft

When he isn't in the therapist's chair, licensed clinical social worker Jim Struve can usually be found outdoors four to five days a week hiking, running or skiing depending on the season.

I'm pretty much an addict," he jokes.

Sometimes, he even takes his clients – often male survivors of sexual abuse and frequently gay men - with him down the slopes or up the mountain as part of their therapy. Why this particular (and unusual) form of treatment? To help clients with such basics as learning to trust and overcoming anxiety - two issues that frequently effect sexual abuse survivors.

"It's about learning to trust somebody, to go out and do physical challenges you wouldn't do on your own, to be and sit where anxiety is challenged a little and learn how to calm it."

There's also something therapeutic, Struve says, in teaching your body how to do something new, and in observing the beauty of nature that "a lot of people have been cut off from." As he puts it, the outdoors contains abundant metaphors for the human psyche.

"Like how an avalanche has such trauma, yet [plant life] is resilient. It grows back," he says, naming one. "You can see that and so many examples when you're out hiking or skiing."

Struve would know best about the transforming power of nature; it was his love for hiking and skiing that convinced him and his partner to make the move from Atlanta, Ga. to Utah in 2003. On the advice of a runner friend, Struve came to the Beehive State to check out its outdoor sports and fell in love.

"I was spending all my free time and money to be here, so my partner and I decided let's just move here and live," he remembers. "Most people thought it was rather unusual for a gay couple to move here, but for us it works."

Before tackling the great outdoors and opening the doors to his private practice, northern Wisconsin-born Struve entered college at the University of Wisconsin in the state's ultra-liberal capitol of Madison. The year was 1967 and Struve (who describes himself as "pretty conservative and pretty naïve" before starting school) quickly got involved in the civil rights movement, the gay rights movement and protesting the draft for the Vietnam War – a decision which, he says, got him arrested on a few occasions. More concerned with politics than education at the time, Struve majored in communications. He had no interest in pursuing a higher degree and didn't until he had to get a masters in clinical social work to keep a job with the Department of Child Protective Services in Georgia, where Struve moved after graduating to pursue what he thought was a "relationship." Through CPS he worked at a hospital's residential facility. In what would become a theme in his career, many of his clients were men and boys with histories of sexual abuse.

Struve opened his practice in 1981 and continued to work with survivors of sexual abuse. Towards the end of the decade he and a handful of other clinicians began Male Survivor, a national organization geared to men and boys who have been sexually abused. Incorporated in 1995, the organization today boasts a national conference, several yearly weekend retreats and an active Web site full of resources, including a bulletin board to help survivors “end the isolation and find other people to communicate with.”

Today, Struve says he works a lot with male survivors, the partners of male survivors, and gay and lesbian clients. He also sees female sexual abuse survivors and regularly points out the different ways society treats male and female survivors when teaching other clinicians, many of whom, he says, have trouble “getting their heads wrapped around” the idea of men and boys being victims.

“The trauma of sex abuse is pretty similar between males and females,” he says. “What really is different is the way in which other people respond to males being the victim. There’s such a social norm that it doesn’t happen to boys, or if it happens they must be gay or they must’ve been seeking it.”

This perception, he adds, can lead to sexual confusion in men of all sexual orientations: They often question if the abuse ‘made them gay’ or if being a survivor means they will become gay later. One of the goals of his work with clients, says Struve, is helping them figure out “what their authentic sexuality is.” And while he sees men of all orientations, Struve suspects that he sees a lot of gay men because of anti-gay prejudice.

“Interestingly, a lot of gay male have sexual abuse histories,” he explains. “Unfortunately, a lot of gay people are targeted for abuse.”

So how does he help survivors come to terms with issues around orientation and bodily loathing (another issue that often plagues sexual abuse survivors)? Re-enter Mother Nature and physical activity. Whether in hiking up a trail or learning not to hate the body another has violated, Struve says the key is mindfulness of yourself and your surroundings. And here he sounds a lot like therapist and aikido practitioner Paul Linden, who will conduct the workshop “Embodying Power - for LGBTQ Individuals” to teach Utah’s queer population about achieving calm and inner strength through bodily awareness at the Utah Pride Center on July 19. Unsurprisingly, Struve and Linden are colleagues and friends.

“What I mean by [mindfulness] is learning how to have awareness in what is going on in your experience, learning to be in your body and being respectful of your body,” he says. “As a survivor it’s really easy to dissociate from your physical body, and as a gay person you learn sort of this self-loathing that happens around your body for being gay, so it’s so powerful to get people back to living in their body again.”

Overall, Struve says he sees himself as a “change agent,” whether in helping survivors or in helping clients undergoing “significant life transitions” like switching jobs, coming out of the closet, or just deciding what they want out of life. Here, he says his 1960s activism and his training converge.

“I found that therapy is a powerful way to work on change issues because of the kinds of clients I work with,” he says. “Their issues are just a different version of doing activism and [encouraging] change.”