the fellowship message

"Proclaiming freedom for the captives." ISAIAH 61

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Journey to Freedom by Natalie

My story has been a journey of discovering who God is and who I am as His child. Believing in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior was the first step in that journey at the age of twelve. While it has taken longer than I have wanted to experience consistent freedom from struggling with same-sex attraction, I am thankful for how God has patiently and unconditionally loved me through this journey (Philippians 1:6).



Natalie is an alumnus of PF's Taking Back Ground discipleship program.

God can take our broken stories and turn them around for our good and His glory *(Romans 8:28)*. Very early in my childhood around the age of four, I think it is very possible that something happened to me that involved an older neighborhood girl, along the lines of bullying and I think very possibly, sexual inappropriateness or abuse. I do not have a clear recollection of what happened, but believe there were indications something did occur. With this as the backdrop in my childhood, there were many trials and joys my family would experience over the next several years. In the midst of changes, I believe I may have felt out of control. I remember starting to look for ways to feel more secure as early as first grade, where I began to want to be more like a boy, I think because they seemed stronger. I believe it is possible I wanted to protect the little girl in me that I think may have already been damaged. Also, I had other experiences in elementary school that were not sexually appropriate with other neighborhood kids, and it felt like I was hiding in a secret world, hidden in shame.

On the exterior, I was a "tom-boy" for several years in elementary school. As I was stepping into puberty I did start to identify more with being a girl. As I got older, I was also getting to have more conversations with my mom about different things, including puberty, boys, and God. I am very thankful that as my mom shared the Gospel with me, I think as early as fourth grade, I was starting to understand what Jesus did for us on the cross *(John 3:16)*, and I was starting to read the Bible and feel convicted of my sin. Before my thirteenth birthday I gave Him my life. The Lord had me on a journey of learning what it meant to believe and follow Him through the rest of my childhood years and into adulthood, and I am still learning. In the midst of growing in my relationship with Him, and developing in young womanhood, there were battles that would come with same-sex attraction, while wanting to be pure in the Lord.

When I went to college, I believe God surrounded me with Christian community, including good friends, and I was continuing to learn to walk with Him more; yet the struggle with same-sex attraction started to become more evident to me. It had come to a point that I decided I needed to move back home and leave the living situation I was in. I am thankful my parents, and my dad specifically, seemed very sure I needed to come home. This reassured me in the midst of my difficult decision. It was like I was being exposed to so many good things in Christian community where I had gone to college, but at the same time there was trauma being pushed up from childhood, battles with depression, and even thoughts of suicide while struggling with deep feelings for one of my roommates. I'm so thankful that my family did embrace me and showed me a lot of understanding and compassion as I opened about the struggle with same-sex attraction and depression.



While I do believe God was faithfully sending help along the way, He was not in a hurry, and it would still take a long time to see the change I see today. I hit a crisis point by my late twenties: Was I going to keep choosing to follow Christ or choose a homosexual lifestyle? When I would try to form healthy, normal friendships with women, I could sense my feelings toward them and the temptation to sin, so I knew I needed help. I am thankful I did not have those feelings in every friendship, but the fact that it happened at all led me to want freedom more, as I wanted God's design for marriage and family. I believed, and continue to, in doing things God's way, or choosing to be alone in holiness to be obedient to Him. I wonder if God was more able to work in my life to bring me into experiencing more freedom once I was at a point of desperation for freedom and with a desire to not give up on my walk with Him.

As I opened up more in church life about this struggle, it was a difficult process, but God continued to bring me into freedom and healing. I remember a mentor in church life sharing an "encouraging" or "prophetic" word that the Lord was going to uncross the confusion inside my brain. I believe He has been doing that very faithfully over the years and through many different contexts. For me, it has included counseling, books I've read, deliverance and inner healing ministry I have gotten to go through, mentors I've walked with who identified with similar struggles yet had testimonies of more than overcoming, and God just faithfully leading me through everyday with Him.

Taking Back Ground was recommended by mentors I had been walking with in my twenties, through a church I had connection with at the time. I started TBG online, with those mentors walking with me through it. For different reasons I did not finish it then. It was several years later, after having gone through a season of deliverance and inner healing ministry, when I prayed about what would be a good step forward. Taking Back Ground with Portland Fellowship came to mind, to rebuild with truth where ungodly strongholds had been *(Romans 12:2)*. Walking through the two-year program of TBG with a community who were on journeys of overcoming similar struggles, while pointing one another to Jesus and the truth found in His Word, was very healing, encouraging, and faith-building. Also, I believe the prayer covering *(James 5:16)* that was provided in that time was very important for seeing breakthroughs and for Jesus being glorified through TBG.

There has not been one quick fix for me with experiencing consistent freedom from same-sex attraction. I was justified by His blood sacrifice on the cross that atoned for my sin, immediately upon believing in Him *(Romans 5:1, 10:9; 1 Cor. 6:9-11). "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come; The old has gone, the new is here (2 Cor. 5:17)!"* I am a new creation! Yet, it has still been a process of sanctification, or appropriating that freedom. It's a choice, but by His grace it's possible to walk in obedience to Him, even when I feel like doing the opposite, *(2 Cor. 9:8)*. I've experienced the Lord often working in ways that are not a program or a ministry session, but just through walking with Him through each day *(Phil. 1:6)*. And, I hope to truly walk in the love He's given me, and reflect the work He's doing. *"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." (Col. 3:12)* He is worthy, and I hope that this testimony helps someone know that freedom is possible in Christ Jesus *(John 8:36)*!

Mentors Who Shaped Us: *Jason Thompson* by Patrick Silvis

This year, we are sharing how God has used mentors to shape and transform those struggling with sexual and relational brokenness. We pray these reflections will encourage you to become a mentor yourself, so that God's grace can flow through you to others.

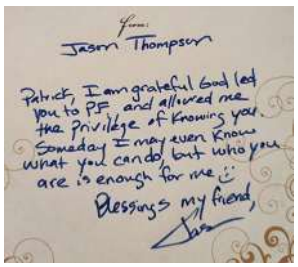


I arrived at Portland Fellowship fourteen years ago, in the fall of 2012. My contact at PF had been Drew Berryessa, who was the Program Manager and led the Upper Room Community. I didn't really know what I was getting myself into, but I was burnt out from trying to deal with my unwanted same-sex attraction while also serving overseas. Drew encouraged me that PF could be a season of being poured into, rather than giving to others. And so I arrived at PDX, terrified but hopeful that under Drew's guidance, and with God's help, I might find answers and resolution to my struggles (which I have, praise God!). What I didn't expect was getting to know Jason Thompson.

My first reaction to Jason was respect—here was a man who loved the Lord, cherished his family, and was passionate about helping others find the hope and healing he had found at Portland Fellowship. And as providence would have it, Jason and Drew became my small group leaders that first year of Taking Back Ground. It was just me and one other participant, which meant we got lots of extra support, encouragement, and (gulp!) healthy challenges.

During my first year at PF, all my emotional scabs were being ripped off, and my deeper wounds were being exposed. It was extremely painful, and I was often overwhelmed by the lies, unhealthy coping mechanisms, and raw neediness that were being revealed in my mind and heart. And yet, Jason lovingly walked with me through that dark season. When I was bitter and unforgiving towards people who'd wounded me, Jason asked things like, "Did they really reject you? What did they say or do?" While it hurt at the time to have my pain questioned, Jason was helping me realize that much of my pain was perceived.

I'm embarrassed to admit it, but Jason was also on the receiving end of some of my passive-aggressiveness. I remember giving him a dirty look one time after he said something to me—I had just finished a difficult counseling session, and Jason's comment triggered the pain and bitterness I was feeling. Poor guy, he was just trying to make small talk! Yet again, Jason was a source of strength, reason, and grace, and we worked through my unfortunate reaction. I was learning how projecting my "stuff" onto innocent bystanders can drive them away, but thankfully, Jason didn't get offended or reject me. He taught me how to lovingly work through conflict.



One memory of Jason has really stuck with me. Since I came into PF burnt out from trying to help others, when I myself needed help, I had some unhealthy and untrue beliefs about my identity. One lie I believed was, "I have to serve others in order to be loved." Jason encouraged me that it was ok to simply receive in that season; there was no pressure to give or do or serve at PF. And, he reminded me that my season of receiving was so that I could later serve God in healthy ways. The most beautiful reminder of this truth came in a devotional Jason gave me for Christmas, where he wrote, "Someday I may know what you can do, but who you are is enough for me." These words spoke deep into my soul, reminding me I could be loved simply for who I was, regardless of my giftings.

As I continued my journey through TBG and the Upper Room Community, Jason became a more formal mentor to me. When I began working at PF part-time, then full-time, Jason's role in my life shifted to that of my boss. And as I've grown and served on staff here now for over twelve years, Jason has joked that he wears many "hats" in his roles in my life. Sometimes he has to put on the Boss Hat, but more often than not, Jason has continued to be a trusted mentor, coach, friend, and "framily" member. When I was struggling with living far away from my biological family, Jason's family included me in their holidays and family events, and I've been so blessed to be "adopted" by them. As Psalm 68:6 says, *"God sets the lonely in families."* It's been an honor to celebrate birthdays, graduations, and anniversaries with the Thompsons, but also to support one another through medical scares, deaths, and relational struggles.

Part of what makes Jason a great mentor is his humility—he never pretends to have it all together. As I've gotten to know him more over the years, it's been an honor to not only learn from him, but also listen to him and encourage him through some of his own struggles. I'm so grateful to God for blessing me through Jason's friendship, leadership, and example in my life. Thank you, Jason!

November - December
Calendar & Services

tuesdays in november
Taking Back Ground
Discipleship program for Christians struggling with unwanted same-sex attraction and/or gender confusion.
6-8:30 p.m. PST

tuesdays in november
Hope Group
Discipleship series for friends & family of gay or trans-identifying loved ones.
**For both Zoom and in-house.*
6-8:30 p.m. PST

december 11
In-Person Hope Group
For friends & family of gay & trans-identified loved ones. Join us for dinner, an encouraging testimony, and time for sharing & prayer.
6:30-8:30 p.m. PST
portlandfellowship.com/friends_family.php

december
Leader Celebration
PF Staff and volunteers will gather to celebrate this year's Taking Back Ground and Hope Group leaders.

december 23 - january 1
Office Closed
PF staff will be celebrating the Christmas & New Year's holidays.

Follow us!
Get updates and inspirational resources on social media.
Facebook & Instagram:
@portlandfellowship

Additional updates:
www.portlandfellowship.com

Speakers, counseling and support for youth
can be set up through the office.

Honoring Our Editor

This month, we are saying a bittersweet goodbye to our long-time volunteer editor, Renee. For over fifteen years, Renee has been a faithful and important part of publishing our monthly newsletters. Unless you have written an article for *The Fellowship Message*, you probably wouldn't know much about Renee's behind-the-scenes work—in fact, she will probably be mortified that we're celebrating her so publicly! And yet, month after month, year after year, Renee has been the one meticulously and prayerfully helping us edit *The Fellowship Message*. Her dedication to grammar, punctuation and detail has been invaluable, and her thoughtful feedback from someone outside the PF leadership bubble has been incredibly helpful.



Renee is moving into a season of retirement and focusing her time and energy on her extended (and growing) family, and we are so excited for her. In addition to being our editor, Renee has served Portland Fellowship in many other capacities, including Board Member, supporter, prayer warrior, and friend. Thank you, Renee, for your many years of service to God's Kingdom and His ministry here at PF. We love you! Well done, good and faithful servant.

Special Invitation

With Renee stepping back, we are looking for a new volunteer editor. If you have technical skills in reading and writing, and experience reviewing printed works, would you prayerfully consider serving the Lord with us in this way? Or, if you know of someone who supports the mission and vision of PF and would be a good fit, please contact us at 503-235-6364 or office@portlandfellowship.com

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PORTLAND
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The Fellowship Message is a monthly publication of Portland Fellowship, a ministry proclaiming freedom from homosexuality through the power of Jesus Christ.

MINISTRY TEAM

Jason Thompson
Executive Director

Patrick Silvis
Program Manager

KathyGrace Duncan
Women & Transgender Ministry

Liisa Bradshaw
Friends & Family Ministry

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post office box 14841
portland, oregon 97293
phone: 503-235-6364
email: pf@portlandfellowship.com
web: portlandfellowship.com
FB/IG: @portlandfellowship