



Newlyweds: Michael Bussee (left) and Gary Cooper in 1979.

GO STRAIGHT YOUNG MAN

FALLING IN LOVE is an emotional high—exhilarating, mind-expanding, exciting. It can also be complicated and messy. For Michael Bussee, who appears in *P.O.V.'s One Nation Under God* (6/14, 10 p.m.), it was more than that. It was against his religion.

Bussee knew he was supposed to fall in love with a woman—any woman—and he tried his best to do so. He prayed. He underwent therapy. He got married. He even got a master's degree in counseling. But that didn't stop him from being attracted to men.

While pursuing his psychology studies, Bussee applied as a Christian hotline counselor. "One of the application's questions asked if you were a former homosexual," says Bussee, 40, in a phone interview from Huntington Beach. "I took the application to the director and told him I didn't know how to answer that question because I still felt homosexual. The director said, 'If you're a Christian, you're not a homosexual. You're a former homosexual. And you'll grow into that true identity. God will bless your faithfulness by lessening your homosexual feelings and replacing them with heterosexual ones.'"

This was a great relief to Bussee. He began teaching a seminar on how gays could become heterosexual. And almost overnight Exodus (now an international organization) was born. Bussee lectured

all over the country on how Jesus was healing his homosexuality. He counseled hundreds of people. In the process he met another counselor named Gary Cooper (no relation to the movie star). Cooper, married with two children, was also struggling with his homosexuality. And that's when things started getting complicated.

"Gary and I formed a close friendship and went out as a speaking team," says Bussee. "What we couldn't admit to each other was that we were falling in love."

"At the same time, we began to notice that after one or two years in the program, many of our clients who initially responded with a lot of hope were becoming very depressed because they were not changing. And one of the very harmful things that these programs tell you is if you don't change, you're not doing enough, you don't have enough faith."

"An increasing number of them became self-destructive. One man slashed his genitals and poured Drano on them. A lot dropped out, and we feared for them."

"We eventually admitted that Exodus wasn't working for us, and it wasn't work-

ing for the people we counseled. Even though we were using the *term* ex-gay, we weren't. We had to tell our wives and the church. We had very mixed feelings. On the one hand we were excited to be in love and to finally be living honestly. But on the other hand we felt we were forfeiting our right to become a child of God, condemning ourselves to hell."

Bussee and Cooper married in 1979. After much study, they came to believe that homosexuality, like heterosexuality, was morally neutral in God's eyes.

"Those who use the Bible to claim homosexuality is evil use selective literalism," says Bussee. "They quote the few passages that condemn homosexuality, while ignoring other passages like those that say that children who disobey their parents should be stoned to death. Jesus said to love God and love your neighbor, and that supersedes everything else."

In 1989, Cooper was diagnosed HIV positive. Since they had a monogamous union, they weren't sure if it was from his early sexual experiences or from a transfusion he'd had during surgery. They were surprised that Bussee wasn't also positive.

"Gary died in September, 1991," says Bussee. "It was excruciating." As if Cooper's death weren't a big enough

loss, Bussee had to deal with one additional blow. "An hour before his funeral, the minister asked how Gary died. I told him it was of AIDS and that we had been in a committed relationship for over 10 years. He said, 'Then I

can't do the funeral. It would be condoning a relationship that I feel is evil.' Luckily a good friend of mine, Mel White, was a minister. He came and did the funeral at the last minute."

Before Cooper died, he and Bussee were filmed for *P.O.V.'s One Nation Under God*. The program examines both sides of the debate about gays going straight, and airs Tuesday, June 14, at 10 p.m.



short takes
By Claudia Pearce