



Badpuppy Gay Today

Monday, 03 November 1997

SAM MANZIE: 15 YEARS-OLD, GAY-AND-CAUGHT IN AN ADULT TRAP

By Perry Brass



Nick Manzie, who lives in a large attractive house in affluent Tom's River, New Jersey, with his wife Dolores, has a strange, distant prettiness to him. His short salt-and-pepper beard is beautifully clipped. His soft green eyes do not look at you. He admits he is a "dedicated Catholic." This must have caused some distance between him and Sam Manzie, his fifteen-year-old son who has been charged with the rape and murder of Eddie Werner, a popular eleven-year-old neighbor who was collecting money for a school PTA candy drive on September 27, the afternoon when after being left alone for six hours, Sam attacked him.

The story of Sam's attack on Eddie has set an entire region, well to do Monmouth County, New Jersey, on edge. It has brought back the old specter of homosexual child predatory behavior, and the evils of the uncensored Internet, which was the instrument by which Sam Manzie met Steve Simmons, a forty-two-year-old man from Long Island, who had a year-long sexual arrangement with Sam. This ended when Sam finally admitted to his therapists at a nearby day treatment center that he had been having a homosexual affair with an older man.

The therapists then, as a matter of policy, notified the Monmouth County police who questioned Sam at length and in detail about his meetings with Simmons. The questioning went on for a period of weeks, during which Sam must have realized that he had become simply a pawn in a legal process which was now out of his control. The questioning sessions, done alone with the cops, went on for hours. They delved into the most intensely private parts of a young man's life-parts that had embarrassed, bewildered, and haunted him. The sessions became in turn a continuation of the arrangement with Simmons, which had spun, also, beyond the boy's control.

Finally, the police, who had brought in the FBI, offered Sam an opportunity to "clear" himself and make himself "useful." They gave him equipment to have his private phone tapped: he would be employed in a "sting" operation against Simmons. Throughout the interrogation Simmons was painted as a predator and a monster, and with their usual insight into these matters, the police could not imagine that Sam would also be starting to think of himself in those terms.

Setting Sam Manzie up as the innocent victim and Steve Simmons as the

criminal, abuser, and predator, is "normal procedure" in child abuse situations, except that by denying Sam's own sexuality, it pushed the boy into the same corner as Simmons-as the accomplice of a predatory criminal. This left a fifteen-year-old boy even more bottled up within his own fears, misery, and loneliness.

By pushing Steve Simmons, who had become Manzie's only intimate confident and friend over a period of a year, so far away, the police had, in their psychological cat-and-mouse games, without another thought, set the boy up. He would end up rushing back to Steve. Living in the emotional vacuum that he had existed in--that most gay or "gay questioning" kids live in-- it was inevitable that he would return to Simmons as the only trustable person he knew, except that now he had gone through a real change himself. He was no longer a lonely but affable young man; he was now close to exploding. He had become, supposedly, a fifteen-year-old hand grenade. A waiting explosive . . . with the Monmouth County cops slowly pulling out the pin.

The police in their own earnest stupidity wanted to believe that if they sank their heads deep enough into the sand (quicksand?) surrounding the Manzies, questioning a very disturbed, frightened boy about things that they themselves found disgusting, then they, in effect, would not have to deal with any of the lives they had destroyed. This is not to say that Steve Simmons had done the right thing, as a forty-two-year-old man seducing a, at-that-time, fourteen-year-old boy; but at least Simmons coming from what we can only call a "gay perspective," could see the amount of bashfulness, shame, and loneliness any gay kid has in him.

One of the things that is so striking about this case is that Simmons always arranged to meet Sam in local shopping malls or amusement parks. These have become the only valves of release for suburban American white kids, these little "wholesome" make-believe towns of shopping and canned fun, where every interaction between people is under surveillance. In the malls you step in, buy, and leave. Social interactions, very important for kids, are a thin by-product of retailing. The malls have become combat zones in the American war with human needs. As I have said in the past, for most kids if they cannot buy it at the shopping mall or see it on TV, then it does not exist for them. In Sam Manzie's case, he did find it at the mall, but it was not something that he would ever be allowed to buy: only engage in for a while.

Sam's parents admitted that their son was a loner, a "nerd" type, who had grown up too tall, too thin, and too fast. He was not basketball material. Even in his farthest fantasies, he was not going to see his name on a box of Nikes. Schoolmates at the various Catholic schools where he was enrolled called him "Manzie the Pansy." His parents' Catholicism became another cage to keep him in--something else to condemn him with. Perhaps with another personality, one able to integrate itself and hide easier, Sam might have lost himself in the neutered Catholic rituals where so many closeted gay kids try to dissolve their guilt. He might have become a choirboy or an acolyte, and later become friendly with a well-meaning priest, who might have seduced him as quietly as Steve Simmons had.

But he was not that sort of boy, which was again a sort of twisted tragedy, because all of Sam's guilt and inner turmoil was not based on a Catholic model

as much as the secular guilt kids now feel in committing a greater sin: they're not cool. They don't get along. And the places where they can hide safely, where their own beautiful, private imaginations are free to develop with any safe physical space around them, are quickly disappearing. Part of that space used to be a nurturing access adults had to kids: a closeness between generations which is the basis for most cultures. This is now almost lost.

The saddest thing about this story is that there was no way for someone openly gay--and not a "concerned" therapist--to talk to Sam. He or she could have assured the boy that basically he was all right; that with time things would get better. Or that he was going through a type of hell that many, if not most, gay men and lesbians have had to enter, and most of them with help can come out of. But that help can not just be in the form of therapy. But no one gay was there to assure him that he was not a predator and an accomplice, but simply a young man who had placed all trust in an older person, who was not the right one.

Instead this fourteen-year-old boy went from the arms of Steve Simmons, who was what in my own youth we used to call a "chicken queen," to the hands of the Monmouth County police and the FBI, who abused him in ways that were for the most part worse than anything Steve Simmons had come up with.

On September 22, Sam Manzie destroyed the wiretap that had been placed on his phone. He then called Simmons to let him know about the sting that would ensnare him. It was obvious that he had felt as much entrapped as Steve, and Steve--for better or worse--had been the only person who had any inkling of what this fifteen-year-old gay youth was going through. The tragedy of this is that Simmons used this information to get what he wanted, which was sex from Sam.

At one point Nick Manzie had been able to trace Simmons's whereabouts through Sam's phone bills. His son was running up bills of two and three hundred dollars a month to Long Island to speak with Simmons. Steve had passively said that he would refuse to speak with Sam again, if Nick insisted. At that point, he told Nick that the boy was only "counseling" him about technology and the Internet. "I had seen his website and called him with questions," Simmons said. Manzie, who realized that his son was drawn to men, then asked Simmons not to contact Sam again. Breaking off contact between Simmons and the boy caused Sam to go into a major depression. He locked himself in his room. He refused to eat. He became physically sick.

It does not take a great deal for someone to understand how much Sam was reaching out for love from Steve Simmons, and how little love Sam was getting from home, despite the seemingly open attitude of his parents. They do seem like loving, fairly progressive, upper-middle-class people. They had never physically abused Sam. They had given him a lifestyle that most kids would love to have. They had gone into debt providing a constant amount of therapy and support for him. Dolores, his very overworked, anxious mother, had told Sam at the age of thirteen that it was "all right" if he were gay. Sam had started to "question" his sexuality, to see how his parents might stand on it.

She used the line that it was probably "just a phase" he was going through, which has become a progressive Catholic line on teen homosexuality: it is only a

"phase." You can overcome it. Of course as reassuring as this might sound, many gay kids will tell you that the "phase" idea--basically a crutch for their parents--is horrific to them. To call their feelings a "phase" is bad enough. But for them to realize that they are probably not going to "out grow" this, is pushing them once more into another dead-end trap. A trap set not only by the violent homophobia of American teens, but by their parents' expectations that their kids will outgrow a phase that they are, for the most part, barely allowed to participate in.

Seeing Sam Manzie's parents recently on ABC's "20/20," being interviewed by a very empathetic but often quite unthinking Barbara Walters (who is starting to take on that Ann Landers role as the bulwark of American middle class values), I kept thinking that there was no way for this boy to express what was necessary at one of the most difficult times in his life. There were no words for him to use; no feelings he could safely bring forth. No ideas in this vapid, strangling suburban setting where he had for the most part barricaded himself into his room.

His parents, who come off so soft and distant as to be useless, had not even set "normal" limits on him (he had his own phone; he would shut himself in his bedroom and tell them to stay out), limits that would show that they had some actual engagement with him. Raising a family has never been easy, but today we have what I refer to as "hobby parents," who want their kids to be "show kids," worth the "quality time" they are bestowing on them. In the Manzie household, this kid had blown up in their faces.

It was only when Sam's behavior became so violent, that last week before his alleged attack on Eddy Werner, that they tried to have their son committed to a full-time treatment facility. At that point, a judge named James Citta, acting as stupidly and misinformed as possible, refused to have Sam sent to a hospital. He ended up reversing roles with the boy's parents, lectured to them as if they were kids, telling them that they had to "grow up" and take care of their son. At that point Dorothy herself was on the verge of cracking up, and both parents realized that they were no longer in control. They were now trapped at home with their unpredictable son.

I wondered how things had got to this point. Nick admitted that whenever his son was on the phone, as he often was with Steve Simmons, he knew not to go into the boy's room. He was embarrassed by an only son he could not understand, a feeling shared by the parents of many gay children. Watching the Manzies on TV, this attractive, bright couple, I wondered why they had had so little contact, so little touching or closeness, with Sam. Instead, I detected in them a sense of benign detachment, as if they hoped that by not dealing with the problems at hand, some distant cordiality might be reciprocated to them. Therefore they left Sam as much alone as possible. It reminded me that during the Inquisition the Inquisitors would be very kind to people before burning them. Heretics would be talked to sweetly, offered the use of a priest, last rites, moments of prayer. All of this would make the proceedings much nicer for the assembled believers and the scene at the stake a little easier to watch.

Perry Brass's latest book is *The Harvest*, a gay science fiction thriller. His

newest book, *The Lover of My Soul*, a book of erotic and spiritual poetry and other writings, will be in bookstores this November. He will be reading at A Different Light in San Francisco on Sunday, Nov 9, at 9 pm, and at A Brother's Touch in Minneapolis on Wednesday, Nov. 12, at 7 pm. He will be at the San Francisco Book Fair on Nov 8 and 9, where can be found at the Alamo Square booth. He can be reached at belhuepress@earthlink.net.

© 1998 BEI; All Rights Reserved.

For reprint permission e-mail gaytoday@badpuppy.com