

In October 2001 an article titled "Bill Clayton" by Olivier Björksäter-Bleylock was published in *DNA*, a national gay magazine in Australia. An interview with me, Bill's mother Gabi Clayton, was done through email, and was the best one I had ever experienced -- and the most intense. Olivier asked about some things that were not in Bill's story on my website since 1996. Answering those questions took days and sometimes had me in a puddle of tears.

It was posted on the *DNA* website, and I couldn't find it online anymore. A slightly different version of Olivier's article was published on *Mogenic*, an Australian based gay youth webzine and internet community, which is also not online now. Luckily I was able to retrieve [the Mogenic version of Olivier's article](#) from [The Wayback Machine](#), an initiative of the Internet Archive, a 501(c)(3) non-profit, building a digital library of Internet sites and other cultural artifacts in digital form.

Here it is:

Bill Clayton

By Olivier Björksäter-Bleylock

At 17 years old, Bill Clayton was like any other regular kid in school. He was creatively ambitious with a passion for theatre, entertaining in class, hated cleaning his room and homework wasn't at the top of his list, either. But, Bill was also openly bisexual and had been for over 3 years.

Surrounded by a sensitive and supportive family, close-knit friends and a neighbourhood of helpers, Bill was also tackling deeper emotions which he kept secret. It ultimately pushed him to take his own life one Spring morning in his family home in Olympia, Washington. Bill's mother, Gabi Clayton, embraces the fond memories of a remarkable young man, and in doing so, has lent a hand to thousands of teenagers worldwide.



Bill was 14 years old and in middle school when he came out to his family. His father, Alec, was managing a bookstore, while his mother was completing her Master's degree in counselling, preparing to set up her own practice in the local area. Bill had been reading a book his mother loaned him, 'Changing Bodies, Changing Lives,' which included a chapter detailing personal accounts of coming out. Having thought about it for some time, Bill was looking for a way to share his sexuality and took a chance one school day afternoon. "He was nervous for some time and it seemed like something was bothering him," remembers Gabi, "but we didn't think it was anything to worry about. We thought it was just something he was going through at his age."



Bill's father was at work at the time he decided to broach the topic. Bill was anxious, which had Gabi concerned, until he finally found the courage, saying, "I'm bisexual." Gabi's initial reaction was a mixture of surprise and relief. The first thing she told her son was, "So is your dad." - something Gabi had always known from the moment they met. "He was afraid to tell us," she explains, "because he knew that other kids had told their parents and that their parents had disowned them or reacted in other ways that were frightening to him. But it didn't change anything with us." Gabi saw her son's coming out as a step toward his own self-awareness and honesty about who he was. "I saw that as a real gift, a sign that we had a good relationship," adds Gabi.

Catherine Dawdy, a housemate and family friend, as well as sometime second mum and sister to both Bill and his older brother, Noel, was also there for Bill's coming out. "I remember asking him if there were any support groups on campus, or any other kids who were out," says Catherine, who is also openly gay. "I was looking for any indication that the school were gay-friendly, but Bill didn't know anything like that."

Filled with release, Bill felt liberated for the first time. "He was so happy, he wanted to run out and tell the whole world," explains Gabi. But she had concerns. "We knew the kind of hate that was out there and that scared us, so at the same time, we wanted to protect him." Later that evening Bill approached his father and older brother. They both took to the news well, responding positively to Bill's sexual development. Over the following weeks, Bill would come out to his best friend, Sam, as well as his close group of friends from middle school. His decision to come out to others was something the family left up to Bill.

Gabi maintained encouragement for the idea of a support group. She felt strong that Bill would gain from talking to other people in a safe environment, sharing his experiences to those in similar circumstances. "At the time the only group we knew of was one at the local college," says Gabi. "He went to that and told us they loved having him there and were supportive and surprised that he had come out at the age of fourteen." Bill attended the local group three times over a month, with little more to say than that he was feeling fine. Having decided the groups were no longer necessary, Bill occupied himself with his usual dozen different projects at once, and continued his involvement with theatre as a technician doing stage work.



Several months had past when Bill began to be noticeably despondent and temperamental. "His life was full of activity, so it wasn't all the time," says Gabi. "We thought it was the normal ups and downs of being a teenager." Gabi and Alec later considered that Bill was possibly bipolar, a condition characterized by the alternation of manic and depressive states of behaviour. There was a history of bipolar disease in Gabi's family tree, but she was later convinced that wasn't going on with him. "I thought, and still do, that Bill was suffering from situational depression."

It wasn't long before everything became apparent. Bill's best friend Sam was staying over one night. The pair spent most of the time talking together in Bill's bedroom, when later that evening Sam approached Bill's mum. He had been crying for some time and found it difficult to tell Gabi

what her son had just told him. Bill had talked for the first time with Sam about the last support group meeting he had gone to. He met a twenty-year-old guy from the same support group on the bus who misled him into skipping the group and venturing back to his place to borrow a book. It was while there that Bill was forced into sex with the man. At only fourteen years old, Bill was terrified and didn't know how to say no. Against any attempts he made to get avoid the situation, he was left with no choice. He had returned home that day pretending he had attended the meeting.

By the time Bill had told Sam about what happened, he also talked about suffering continual flashbacks and being suicidal. "Bill had Sam promise he wouldn't tell anyone, but Sam told me he didn't want to lose his friend to suicide. He put their friendship on the line and told us," explains Gabi. "I immediately approached Bill and when I told him I knew, he was relieved, not angry. He agreed that we needed to report it to the police and that he needed counselling."

The following day police logged a report and begun their search for the perpetrator who sexually assaulted Bill. They didn't find him. Bill subsequently commenced counselling during that time. "While he was there, he had been talking to his therapist about joining the military after high school," says Gabi, who was completing a graduate internship with a centre that specialised in sexual abuse at the time. She saw Bill's behaviour as an act of self-destruction, since he was a pacifist, and the military wasn't openly tolerant to minorities.

Bill's depression was aggravated by post-traumatic stress. This was mostly triggered by the fact that he had caught sight of the young man who assaulted him around town on numerous occasions. "One time we had all gone to see 'Schindler's List' and after the movie Bill became very moody," remembers Gabi of Bill's mood swings. "We thought it was the impact of the film, which was more personal for us because my father was a German Jewish refugee." What the family didn't realise was that Bill's molester was sitting a couple of rows ahead of them in the theatre, forcing Bill to watch him watch the film.

At one point, Bill was hospitalised for serious depression and plans of suicide. After a week, he was released from hospital and returned home with his family. Bill remained in private counselling with a specialist in sexual abuse. He was also on a course of prescribed anti-depressants. After a few months, Bill was finally showing signs of his former mischievous self again. His mental health began to remarkably improve. He even took on a job during summer vacation doing junior office duties and computer data - things that Gabi says he enjoyed. "He even started looking forward to school again, after two rough years. And he felt like he had a future. He had dreams and told me he wanted to be a sculptor, a teacher and a counsellor."



In January 1994, the authorities finally caught up with his attacker, after almost three years. A friend of Bill's older brother tipped off the police of his whereabouts and within a matter of hours he was taken into police custody for questioning. He confessed to the same events as Bill had reported, and he was charged on two counts of sexual assault and child molestation. He was appointed a defence lawyer, and pled not guilty at his arraignment, and was granted bail.

By the time Bill had turned 17-years-old, his progress in therapy had given him a new grasp on life. He was openly out, and a committed member with the activist club at Olympia High School. It was at that same time the club had invited Colonel Margarethe Cammermeyer to speak at the school assembly for Women's History month. Cammermeyer was the highest-ranking colonel to date who challenged the US military's ban of gays, based on prejudice and violation of her constitutional rights. She subsequently won her case over the army in federal district court.

Controversy erupted when parents in the local community tried to prevent Cammermeyer from speaking in Olympia, based on religious grounds. Letters poured into the local papers and council in protest. Activists, including Bill, found out they were going to attend a school board meeting to block Cammermeyer. They immediately rallied as many people to attend. Gabi and Catherine were among the 300 supporters who turned up on the night to speak. "It was attended by hundreds of students, parents and community members to debate the legitimacy of having a lesbian speaker in the school," remembers Catherine. "This was the first open forum about gay issues ever in the high school." The board deliberated over both sides and ruled in favour of her appearance. Cammermeyer publicly spoke in Olympia on 2nd March 1995.

But the climate in the neighbourhood was not so supportive over the school's decision, causing mixed feelings to linger throughout the city. Although a liberal town at times, letters of hate flooded the local newspaper and anti-gay feelings were stirring up. "There were people then, like now, who propagate hate, and they are not going to give up easily," explains Gabi. "There is sometimes backlash when people get scared, and there are people who use that fear to get power."

One month later, on April 5th 1995, Bill and his counsellor both agreed that he no longer required therapy. His case was closed with Crime Victims Compensation that same afternoon. Bill had made significant progress. He had finally found a definite purpose in life again, and he was looking forward to the future. It was Spring break, and Bill was enjoying the time off to enjoy hanging out with friends. The very next day, Gabi received an alarming phone call at work from her son, telling her he had been severely beaten and assaulted. "The police wanted to have the medics take Bill to the hospital which they needed parent permission for," says Gabi. "I gave it, immediately called Alec and we met him at the hospital."

Bill had been walking through town with his best friend Sam, and Sam's girlfriend Jenny. They had rented a couple of videos, and were headed back to Jenny's house nearby. Passing by the High School, the three were tagged by a car filled with four boys - one of whom Bill recognised as a fellow student at his school. They followed them around a few blocks, screaming obscenities towards Bill, slandering his sexuality. Bill, Sam and Jenny walked on and ignored them. The three then decided to walk through the school campus because the gates were closed and figured it would be safer. The car drove off, leaving them in peace.

Within a matter of minutes, Bill, Sam and Jenny found themselves surrounded by the same four guys. They had parked nearby, and followed them through the school. The boys tried to pick a fight with both Bill and Sam, pushing them around, while the three tried to walk on. Bill was suddenly struck down, and the four viciously bashed and kicked both Bill and Sam in broad daylight, until they were both unconscious, while Jenny screamed at them to stop them. The boys fled the scene, and when the boys regained consciousness, the school custodian was alerted and the police were called. Both Bill and Sam were both badly beaten and heavily bruised all over. Sam was managing a broken nose and several deep lacerations, while Bill was thought to have suffered severe kidney damage.



While Bill was being further examined, Sam and others were waiting in the emergency room. Suddenly, one of the four boys who had beaten them, walked by, on his way to visit a friend who had just given birth to a baby. "Sam recognised him, and hospital security called the police," says Gabi. "They caught him, and he confessed and named the three other boys. Considering the emotional turmoil Bill had been suffering, he handled all of it amazingly well." Both boys were given the all clear from hospital staff, and they returned home that evening. A nurse in the emergency room advised Gabi take photos which would later be used as evidence.

Bill, like other youth his age was exploring his identity, trying to prepare himself for the near future, for the end of high school, for college, for relationships, for transitioning into the adult world. What he saw coming, based on his experiences, was more of the same harassment and hatred. He decided to talk to the press about what had happened. He spoke candidly with several journalists, bringing a lot of media attention to what was a hate crime based on his sexual orientation.

Local community activists suggested the possibility of organising an anti-hate rally following what had just happened. Bill and Sam, as well as Jenny were in on the idea. With community involvement, a rally was held on 14th April 1995 in Sylvester Park, a popular recreational area in Olympia. Colonel Cammermeyer returned to speak at the rally in support of Bill, as well as both his parents. Bill's brother Noel couldn't make it due to college commitments, but his letter to the local newspaper was published the following week, showing his support.

Later that day, Bill caught sight of the young man, who sexually assaulted him, in the crowd. Catherine had seen him only a few days prior, while riding on a bus. She had given him a stern warning not to show his face at the rally, which fell on deaf ears. Bill panicked, and alerted his mum as well as Catherine, who immediately approached him, and told him to leave. Gabi told a family friend, who rushed off in search of a phone to call the police, and it was only then that he suddenly disappeared.

After the rally Bill sunk back into depression, overwhelmed by the manifested hate. The experience was starting to become more than he could handle. "He told me he was tired of coping," remembers Gabi of Bill's torment. "He felt like he would be dealing with one assault after another for a long time into the future." Bill stayed indoors, feeling home was the only place he could feel safe. He eventually told his mum he was suicidal. Gabi kept a close watch on

him, never leaving him alone at home. Bill eventually agreed to be hospitalised. There was no room in the psychiatric unit in Olympia so Bill checked into a hospital in Seattle, about an hour away from home. He was there for 9 days.

"The intensity of it all came as a shock and as a challenge to Bill, who just couldn't understand why some people were so vehemently hateful towards gay people," says Catherine. "He had never felt such a forceful wave of hatred. And he, like so many others of us in this community felt it very personally."

While Bill was in hospital, he heard of another friend was gay-bashed in a nearby town. He was back on anti-depressant and, in spite of the recent news, Bill was showing sound signs of stability again. "No one thought he was suicidal any more," says Gabi. "We wanted to believe that the doctors had helped him - that they had all the answers."

On 8th May 1995, Bill woke up that morning and said he had a stomachache. He asked his mum if he could stay home that day. Later that morning, Bill got a call from a friend telling him that Isaac, a friend who Bill worked with in the High School Theatre Club, had been killed in an accident during the night. Bill asked his mum to buy the morning paper so he could read about his friend. Isaac had been 'tagging' - spray-painting graffiti art - on a building downtown, when he fell back into power lines and electrocuted. "Bill was upset, which was a normal reaction to that," remembers Gabi. "Because everyone else had left for the day, I asked him if he wanted me to stay home with him. He said he was fine, and that it wasn't necessary. None of us would've left him alone if we had thought he would make a suicide attempt."

It was early afternoon that Gabi suddenly had a strong feeling about Bill and felt compelled to check on him. Between clients down at the clinic, Gabi called Bill, and the phone rang out. Eventually, Bill answered the phone and it sounded like it was knocked off the hook. "I could barely hear Bill. He was trying to say something," explains Gabi. "I asked him if he was alright. I was starting to become terrified." Bill eventually mumbled down the receiver, "You'll see," and dropped the phone. Gabi called Sam's house. They only lived around the corner from their house and would be able to check on Bill. No one was home. "I thought he was sick with a high fever or something. I was scared but I didn't think suicide."

Gabi paged her husband to call the centre, leaving Catherine with a message for him to go home immediately to check on Bill. Gabi's next client had already arrived for their appointment, so she wasn't able to leave the office. "After I was finished with my client, Catherine met me at my door and said we needed to go to the hospital." Alec had found Bill on the kitchen floor, barely breathing. He had taken an overdose of prescription combined with over the counter medications. Alec immediately called for an ambulance. He then phoned the clinic for Gabi and Catherine to meet him in the emergency room. "The doctors told us this was no cry for help - that he must have intended for this to end his life, based on what he had taken," says Gabi. "They speculated that Bill's attempt was somehow a copycat of Isaac's death, following his lead. We told them then and still think there is no truth in that whatsoever. When Bill asked to stay home that day, we believe he was already planning to kill himself even before he knew what happened to Isaac."

The hospital staff worked for hours to save Bill. He was eventually placed on life support, due to the severe damage he sustained to his brain from the overdose. Gabi telephoned Noel to explain what had happened to his little brother. He headed home as soon as he found friends to drive him from Bellingham, where he was studying. When Alec went to move the car to avoid a parking ticket, the doctor came out and explained that Bill would probably remain in a vegetative state for the rest of his life. The decision to turn off the machines was left in the hands of Bill's parents. Gabi struggled to accept her son's fate. "From a place in me that was fogged and clear at the same time, I felt that we would have to turn off the life support, but I couldn't say it without talking to Alec."

The doctors returned to the intensive care unit to monitor Bill. A few minutes later returning from the car, Gabi, Alec and Catherine talked about the decision they were being confronted with. A doctor joined them and gently explained that Bill had made the decision for them. Their youngest son, Bill Clayton, had past away. He didn't leave any note to help explain what they already knew.

"When Bill died, I was completely numb, and shut down. I'm amazed that I survived, because the grief was so painful," says Gabi, speaking from her home in Olympia. "And I would be lying if I told you that suicide didn't cross my mind, because it did. I wanted out, but I wasn't about to let the grief take over. I guess being the mother of a son who committed suicide, it was natural to blame myself - to look at everything that happened and see the mistakes I made. I know - I'm human. But the stakes were so high and Bill lost, and in the end so did all of us who loved him."

Surrounded by extended family, friends and supporters, the Claytons found a way to go on after losing Bill. They took it one day at a time. All the people who loved him, and were touched by Bill's life made plans for a memorial service. The family had him cremated. "Everyone took such amazing care of us after Bill's death," explains Gabi. "At first it was enough to get thorough each day. And his memorial service would never have happened without them. And it was an incredible part of our healing process."

Everyone in the community was invited to bring a candle, and those who attended were given a prayer stick to hold during the service, making a wish for Bill. After the ceremony, the Clayton family stood at the door and lit each candle as people passed, and everyone walked across the street to Sylvester Park in silent vigil, and there the prayer sticks were collected. Later that evening family and close friends burnt the prayer sticks in a bonfire to release the wishes for Bill so that they would travel with him.

During the whole ordeal, Gabi kept in contact with the prosecutors in the trials against the four boys who had attacked Bill. Gabi attended each hearing with Catherine, except for one, due to other commitments. Alec was consumed with too much anger to attend, so he stayed away. Sam and his family were also there. Gabi was given the opportunity to speak at each trial, explaining the devastating loss she was experiencing. All four boys ignored her during the trials, and they refused to express regret for their actions. One of the parents said that she was shocked at her son's behaviour, she was divorced from his dad and her son didn't live with her. She said that she had gay friends and told the judge to do whatever she thought was best. "One father asked the judge to be lenient on jail time because his son would lose his summer job. When I spoke at that

trial I explained to that father that my son would never have another summer job." His attempts of plea-bargaining were overlooked by the Judge. All four boys were sentenced to 30 days in juvenile detention followed by probation, community service and 4 hours of diversity training focusing on sexual orientation.

During the hearings, Gabi slowly returned to work, and returned, as she puts it, "to the land of the living." But she still had one more challenge to face: Bill's sexual assault trial, which appeared to be mishandled by both attorneys. The prosecutor asked the judge to refrain from a harsher sentencing due to the defendant's cooperation with the police in assisting to detain another molester. "That was an absolute lie!" The anger in Gabi's voice is apparent. "The day before court a police officer involved in Bill's case told me Bill's molester was playing games with police for appearance sake and wasn't helping at all. They had informed the prosecutor too! I don't know if the prosecutor was suffering from burnout or homophobia, but I suspect it was both."

The defence attorney's approach was that Bill Clayton must have been looking for something when he attended the homosexual support group. The prosecutor didn't object to the claim, which infuriated Gabi and her family. The defence also argued that his client didn't know that it was a rally for Bill, and that he just happened to be walking in the park that day. Shortly after, Gabi was permitted to make a statement. "I told the judge that he had specifically come to the rally, even after being told to stay away. I also said that while I couldn't blame the molester for Bill's suicide, he had never been suicidal until he was molested." The defence tried to plea-bargain a sentence of less than 12 months imprisonment to allow his client the ability to claim work release to maintain his job. The Judge sentenced him to 13 months, disqualifying him from work release, and in doing so, she said, "While I can't take Bill Clayton's death into account in sentencing you, I also can't forget that he is not here." The Claytons were lucky to see a sentence of that length handed down. Other judges would have delivered a lesser judgment.

Giving herself the necessary time to heal after the trials, Gabi invested in a computer and begun to surf the web. After visiting several sites and reading stories of similar circumstance, on 6th November 1995 Gabi designed her own website with a simple page asking people to speak out and help end the hate. The page was dedicated to her son. Slowly people started to find it. On 26th June 1996, Steve Schalchlin passed through the site and contacted Gabi to visit his web page, which contained an on-line diary. It gave Gabi the inspiration to tell Bill's story, which was posted on Gabi's website at the end of October 1996. "I never expected that I would be able to reach so many people. I am amazed every day. Bill and his story have been powerful in helping to open people's hearts and educate people about the effect of hate. The work I have been doing on my web pages has been an amazing part of the process. The people I have met because of Bill and the responses they have sent me have been incredible."

Since the development of her website, Gabi is constantly asked how she survived Bill's death. "What makes you think I survived?" asks Gabi. "I'm not the same person I was before he committed suicide. In some ways I am more myself now because I found something in myself - the strength to continue - in my own heritage. My parents were activists and for me the only way I was able to live was if I found some way to take what happened to Bill and find a way to do something with it that could help end the hate that Bill could not survive."

It took years for Gabi to decide to bury Bill's ashes under two trees in their backyard. A place where Bill would feel safe. "Before we buried him, the ashes were sitting in our hall linen closet. So Bill got to come out of the closet one last time. There is some humour there - Bill would have liked that - he was quite the little rascal."

Seven years on, Gabi Clayton now operates her own counselling centre in Olympia and shares office space with Catherine, who recently graduated from massage school. She also works part-time at a transitional housing program for mentally ill patients released from hospital into the community. Gabi continues as an active board member of the Olympia chapter for PFLAG - Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, editing newsletters and web pages. She is a list assistant for PFLAG-Talk and PFLAG-Discuss, and is currently assisting to form FUAH - Families United Against Hate- a national network for families and survivors of hate motivated violence. And if that's not enough, Gabi is also an active member and training officer for the Safe Schools Coalition of Washington, as well as a board member for Youth Guardian Services which runs a wide range of support services for kids ranging from straight ally youth to young people 25 years and younger living with HIV. She is also currently working on the website for the Northwest Coalition for Human Dignity. Bill's father Alec is a painter and a writer, and has just published his first novel. He is involved in PFLAG and edits the newsletter with Gabi for the local chapter. Noel graduated from college with a degree in acting and theatre, and works as a technician in Seattle.

"I am not done with my grieving - but I have come a long way on this journey. I feel Bill's spirit working on me, and others, and I know that while I have lost him body and mind, I haven't lost him completely. The impact he had on me and those who knew and loved him will never die. Each of us carries Bill with us every day, in our own ways. The love is not lost. And while the world is still filled with hate, but there is also so much that is good and loving. I have to stay connected and open to that or I wouldn't have the energy or the power to go on. We have a lot of work to do. But I have a lot of hope and I believe we are making a difference."

Pull Quote from Bill's Diary:

In the world today many people's careers and happiness are ruined by small mistakes in their pasts which for one reason or another cannot be forgotten. I myself am a good example of this. Over a year ago I gave into pressure to have sex with an older man, and to this day I suffer from bouts of suicidal depression, have nightmares every other night, and am constantly uncomfortable around adult males.

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Read Bill's Story and more on Gabi Clayton's website here:

<https://gabiclayton.com/BillsStory/>