Sara’s comments on first draft:

REPORTING

Need more sources - his parents - more of his old and new friends - the people who knew him in high school before he came out, and the ones who were there in the dorm when he came out here. Talk to Dave about atheism in the U.S. Also need perspectives on how and why some gay people don’t feel comfortable in churches.

DATA

Need more data! What happened to Pew? <http://www.pewforum.org/Topics/Issues/Gay-Marriage-and-Homosexuality/>

Need data on both atheists in the U.S. and gay people. Both of these topics are controversial and trending. We discussed how this story should incorporate trends on both of those things. Look at your NYT article for an illustration of how this is done.

WRITING

I need more of a sense of what Theo believes and how this conversion has changed his life. Right now the story gives me a chronology but it’s missing the deeper meaning. I don’t feel like I know him, what he’s like, why this is important to him. I want to see what he does in daily life.

The current lede/nut graf is too short of an introduction before delving into a chronological retelling of the story. We need to understand Theo and his life a bit more before going back to the past.

Add more of the things I’m asking for, and also cut the story length. Shoot for no more than 800 words next time.

**Reporter byline**: Ian Servantes

**Reporter contact info**: 720-320-4139 ianservantes@gmail.com

**Assigned word count: 500-600 vs.** 1,109

**Print Hed & Dek (give at least 3): Print Dek**: Leap From Faith: A group for nonbelievers helps Theo Tushaus find comfort in his homosexuality

Leap From Faith: Theo Tushaus’ journey through atheism, homosexuality, and acceptance

**Web Hed & Dek (give 1)**: Leap from Faith: A group for nonbelievers helps Theo Tushaus find comfort in his homosexuality

**Story Links:** (at least 3 that could be embedded into story on website)

**Suggested Tweet**: A gay student finds comfort in his homosexuality after discovering a godless group (link)

**Suggested Facebook post**: A gay student finds comfort in his homosexuality after discovering a godless group (link)

**Suggested Web Excerpt**: Admitting he was gay to a group of friends was not only the first time he told someone else, but also the first time he told himself. Finding the comfort to do both started with his conversion to Atheism.

**Two versions of a lede**:

Let’s try two radically different approaches to the story.

It just slipped out. Theo Tushaus, then a freshman at MU?, was chitchatting with friends on a September, 2011 evening in a dorm room at Hatch Hall when Zoe Ballam mentioned liking boys. It was hardly a bombshell, but then Theo agreed. “Really?” she asked. Nervous, he felt as if he’d already show his cards.

Theo knew he? liked boys. He was just never comfortable with calling himself gay. For a while, he convinced himself that he could just be bisexual and date girls for his whole life, shunning his desires. But that wouldn’t be him.

**Body of the story**:

“Yeah, I also like boys.”

This wasn’t only the first time he admitted being gay to another person, it was also the first time he truly admitted it to himself. Finding the comfort to do both started with his conversion to Atheism.

This is too short of an introduction before delving into a chronological retelling of the story. We need to understand Theo and his life a bit more before going back to the past.

Also, need more of a nut graf in your story. How is this part of a larger issue?

Tushaus grew up where? in a liberal, Christian household, two viewpoints that are often conflicting. When a new, more conservative pastor unfriendly towards gays and strict on abortion arrived at the family church, Brookdale Presbyterian, Theo’s parents decided to move to another place of worship. Where and when did this take place? Have you interviewed the parents about this? What about the pastor referenced here?

Lynn and Dave, a former middle school science teacher and lawyer, respectively, always taught their son to question things. When Theo met an atheist for the first time early in high school, that mentality led him to question his own faith. When and how did that encounter happen?

First went hell. He didn’t like the idea of “eternal punishment for a finite sin.” He started researching online and found people who believed in God, but not hell. A few members of his church even had the same point of view. From there came the conclusion that if Christianity was wrong about hell, the whole thing could be false. For about a week, Theo became a deist. Unclear what this means.

“Even that takes a leap of faith,” he says of his short-lived view, “because scientifically we can’t prove anything beyond our experiences exists.”

So he became an Atheist.

“I just sort of went through logically and decided that I couldn’t be a rational thinker and have faith in God.”

He started telling his classmates. Telling them what? That he was gay? Atheist? Was this in high school? Where did he go to school? A few of them wouldn’t talk to him afterwards, but his closest friends were accepting of the leap from faith. However, not necessarily with homosexuality, despite that “you would think that somebody who would be accepting of atheists would also be accepting of gay people,” Theo says. His friends would use slurs against the LGBTQ community. Be more specific here. Were his friends atheists? What did they say? Did you interview any of them?

The environment at his high school wouldn’t let him be comfortable with his homosexuality. Theo even started dating a girl senior year, convincing himself that, even though he knew he liked boys, maybe he could be bisexual and just date women for the rest of his life.

“Stupid,” he says looking back, before a laugh. Bisexuality would only serve Theo a façade, not the answer to his sexual orientation.

When classes began in August at MU, Theo immediately began attending weekly meetings for MU SASHA, a student group of skeptics, atheists, secularists, humanists and agnostics. These terms need some unpacking. In it, he found something previously absent in his life: a place to talk about topics like religion—or being adverse to it— and sexuality openly with similar, non-judgmental peers.

“Before that,” he says, “I just sort of had the Internet. Chat rooms and forums only go so far to make you comfortable.” Good quote.

A tabling event called “Ask an Atheist” gave him the chance to talk about homosexuality with Dave Muscato, SASHA’s Vice President, without outing himself. Through that conversation and others with SASHA members, it started becoming clear that Theo would be able to come out of the closest to an audience of acceptance.

After coming out to the group of friends in the Hatch dorm room, he found relief. Theo began coming out to more people: his other friends in Hatch, members of SASHA, and the staff at the LGBTQ resource center, where he started to attend meetings for the MU Triangle Coalition, a group for members of the LGBTQ members and their allies.

In confiding with others, he found acceptance. No shunning or discrimination; no judgments or criticism; but understanding.

Bradly Brackenbury, who is he? now one of Theo’s best friends, was one of the first people told after the initial dorm room revelation. Who were the people in the dorm room, and have you interviewed them? They were there when the transformation happened. When and how did Theo tell Bradley? He treated it as just another thing about Theo, as something to be embraced.

“I felt important because that’s a big thing in their life,” Bradley says. “Being in the room as one of the people that he felt comfortable telling it to made me feel like I had a real sense of responsibility to be trusted like that.”

It couldn’t have happened without joining the group of nonbelievers. Not so smoothly, so quickly.

“I definitely wouldn’t be the person I am today,” Theo says when asked where he’d be had he not joined SASHA. He might have came out anyway, but would still probably be uncomfortable identifying as a gay man and definitely wouldn’t be as outspoken as he’s become.

Recently, he was elected to become Tri-Co’s president starting next fall.

“I don’t think he’s changed as much as he’s become himself,” Muscato, now pr director for American Atheists, Inc., says.

Besides studying, obviously, Theo calls being a gay atheist in SASHA and Tri-Co the reason why he’s here. “That’s who I am on campus and how I see myself through the lens of the Mizzou community.

However, ~~that identity was only rooted in Mizzou for months, as~~ he didn’t tell his parents about being gay until January 2012, or about being an atheist until last semester.

“Looking back, I probably should have told them a lot earlier because they’re totally accepting about it,” he says. Another mistake, which he laughs about, was telling them over the phone a week into the spring semester. We REALLY need his parents’ perspective in here.

He had meant to come out to his parents during winter break, but didn’t get a good chance for a one-on-two conversation as the house was filled with extended conversation. His only chance was on the last day before returning to Mizzou.

“I didn’t want to be like, “Bye, Mom and dad. Oh by the way, I’m gay.”

Awkwardness of the method aside, it was another smooth step in his path. There was just one more move to make, one fitting in a generation that uses the Internet like another appendage.

He changed his Facebook profile to read “Interested In: Men”.

**Sidebar or Info Box if needed**:

**Sources**: Make sure you include their Facebook pages, Twitter handles, websites etc. in addition to phone and email. Include when, where and how you interviewed the person. (By phone, email, in person; at the office, home, etc.)

Theo Tushaus (interviewed multiple times in person, at the student center over the past two weeks)

816-273-9888

tjt3nc@mail.missouri.edu

https://twitter.com/SashaToosh

<https://www.facebook.com/theo.tushaus?fref=ts>

Dave Muscato (Interviewed over the phone March 19)

573-424-0420

[mail@davemuscato.com](mailto:mail@davemuscato.com)

<https://www.facebook.com/davemuscato?fref=ts>

<http://www.davemuscato.com/>

<https://twitter.com/davemuscato>

Bradly Brackenbury (interviewed over the phone March 20)

816-682-8704

<https://www.facebook.com/angels.with.machineguns>

Still need to talk to:

Lynn and Dave Tushaus (I’ve left a few voicemails)

816-262-4689

Need more sources - more of his old and new friends - the people who knew him in high school before he came out, and the ones who were there in the dorm when he came out here.

**Documents as Sources**: (links or copies of data, reports, records; must include statistical support for your story)

<http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/13-culture/282-spiritual-profile-of-homosexual-adults-provides-surprising-insights> This found that 43% of homosexuals identify as having a “orthodox, biblical perception of God

Need more data! What happened to Pew?

Need data on both atheists in the U.S. and gay people. Both of these topics are controversial and trending. We discussed how this story should delve into both of those things.

**Media Support**: (news articles on your general topic)

Do more primary media research - find articles that talk about trends.

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/sen-chambliss-gay-marriage-gay-article-1.1295002>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/26/magazine/from-bible-belt-pastor-to-atheist-leader.html?pagewanted=all>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/01/us/ex-gay-men-fight-view-that-homosexuality-cant-be-changed.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>