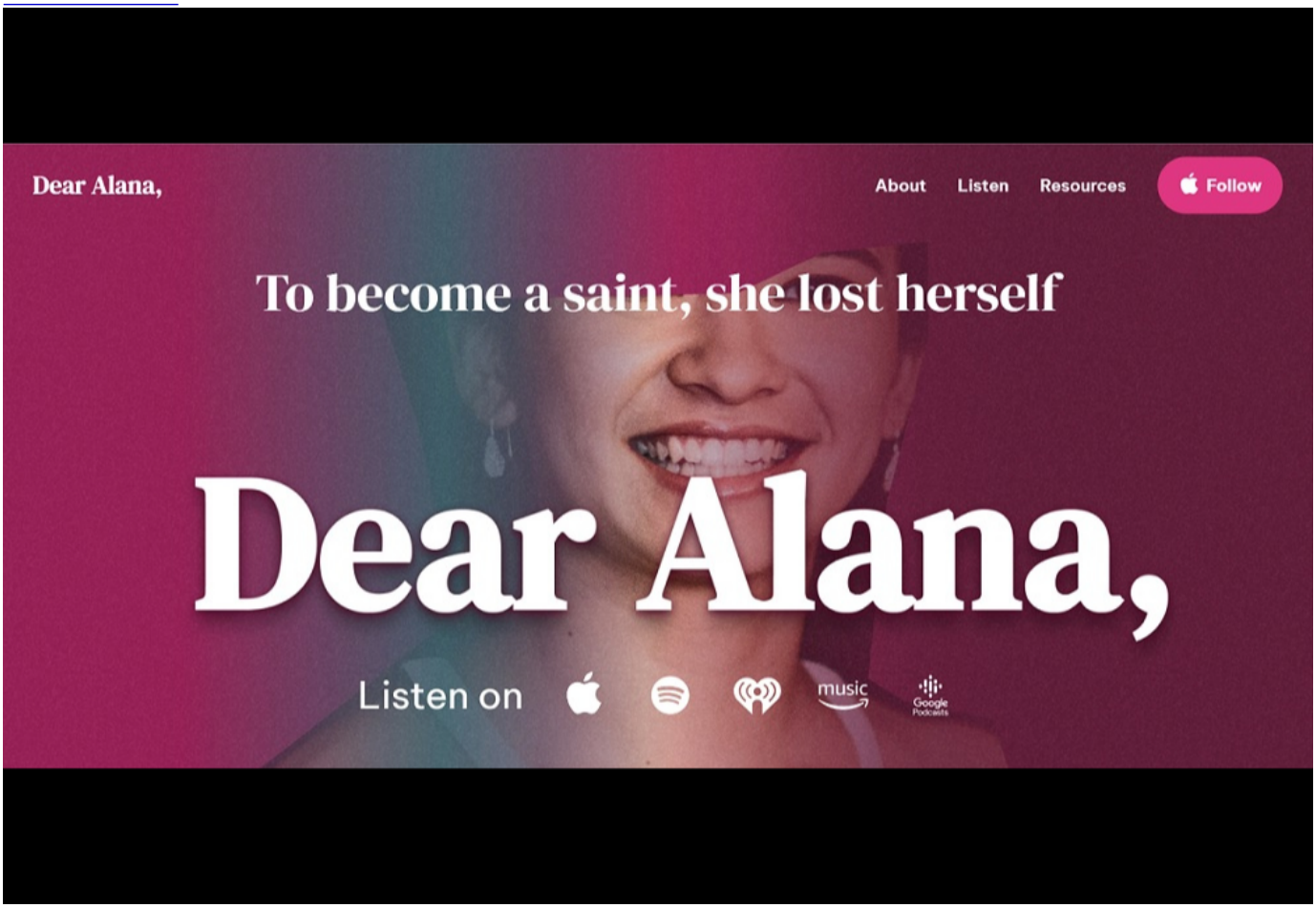
Opinion
NCR Voices



Alana Chen's story is told in an eight-episode podcast, which began releasing one episode at a time in mid-August. "Dear Alana," was created, hosted and produced by Simon Kent Fung. (NCR screenshot)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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Editor's note: *If you are having thoughts of suicide, call or text 988 to reach the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline or go to* **SpeakingOfSuicide.com/resources** *for a list of additional resources.*

As a journalist, some stories stick with you for a long time — and some even haunt you. For me, that story is about Alana Chen, a 24-year-old Colorado woman who died by suicide after counseling from priests and other Catholic leaders about her homosexuality.

Although church officials deny engaging in "conversion therapy," Alana's mom says her daughter's journals and conversations with her before she died make it clear that they encouraged her to conceal and suppress her sexual orientation.

Ever since Alana's death, her mother has been committed to telling her daughter's story with the hope that other young LGBTQ Catholics might be spared what she believes was harmful intervention by representatives of the church.

At NCR, we ran a Religion News Service story about Alana, and later published an essay by her mother, Joyce Calvo. I first met Calvo in 2021, when a colleague from another publication connected us. She and I began corresponding by email and eventually spoke on the phone several times. I worked with her as an editor, but I couldn't help also sympathize as a mom.



Alana Chen died by suicide in 2019. Although church officials deny engaging in "conversion therapy" with her, Alana's mother insists that priests and other representatives of the church encouraged her daughter to conceal and suppress her sexual orientation. (Photo courtesy of the family)

Now Alana's story is being told in an eight-episode podcast, which began releasing one episode at a time in mid-August (Subscribers to Tenderfoot TV can binge-listen to the entire series.) "Dear Alana," was created, hosted and produced by Simon Kent Fung, a documentary filmmaker who recognized some of his own story in Alana's.

"For years, I kept a secret," he is quoted as saying on the podcast's website. "Deeply religious and intent on becoming a priest, I sought conversion therapy through individual and group counseling, prayer and healing ministry, and self-study. When I read about Alana's story, it all came flooding back. I knew I couldn't keep this a secret any longer."

Alana's story is heartbreaking: A quiet, sensitive young teenager who loved ultimate frisbee and fashion, she expressed interest in becoming a nun and started attending daily Mass. Her mother had no idea that the individuals and groups she was meeting at church were adamantly anti-LGBTQ.

Nor did she know that her own daughter was attracted to girls — in part, because a priest told Alana to keep it a secret from her parents, believing that they would be accepting of her sexual orientation.

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In her journals, Alana wrote about how Fr. David Nix, a controversial priest who became her "spiritual director," asked her to share intimate details about her sexual feelings with him and insisted that she could change her orientation. Later, the Sisters of Life encouraged Alana to undergo therapy with a therapist who offered conversion therapy — which her mother did not allow. (In statements to NCR in 2022, Nix, Sisters of Life, the Denver Archdiocese and St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Center/Fr. Peter Mussett denied practicing or suggesting conversion therapy with Alana.)

Conversion therapy refers to any practice that attempts to change an LGBTQ person's sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. It has been discredited by most mental health organizations and medical societies not only because it does not "work" but because it puts people, especially children, at risk of serious harm, including a dramatically increased rate of anxiety, depression and suicide.

More than two dozen states, including Colorado, now ban conversion therapy for minors in some way, but these bans do not include religious providers.



Alana Chen was a sensitive, quiet and empathetic child, according to her mother, Joyce Calvo. She loved to write poetry, play guitar and make her own clothes. (Courtesy of the family)

For Alana, the constant message that she was somehow broken and in need of healing from representatives of her church took a toll, even after she tried to distance herself from them. Despite seeking help from reputable therapists, Alana expressed much hurt and despair in her journals, and died by suicide on Dec. 8, 2019.

That story resonated with Fung, who as a teenager growing up in Toronto also was deeply religious, felt called to priesthood and met with a priest who referred him to conversion therapy.

Fung weaves his own story in with Alana's, and includes interviews with her friends, siblings and mom. What makes the podcast especially gut-wrenching are the words of Alana herself, read by an actor. Calvo gave Fung permission to copy Alana's journals and to use them to tell her story in the podcast. Her day-to-day recording of her own thoughts and of her descriptions of meetings with the religious leaders lends credence to Calvo's assertion that their "counseling" contributed to her death.

Calvo continues to fight to bring awareness to the dangers of conversion therapy, especially when it is insidious in religious circles.

"Alana's story shows us how much deep, difficult work the Catholic Church needs to do to learn how to love its LGBTQ+ members so that no parent is robbed of their children and no child is robbed of their God-given uniqueness," Calvo wrote her NCR essay. "The church must stop rejecting LGBTQ+ children."

I reached out to Calvo to let her know I would be writing about the podcast. She replied: "I haven't listened to a full episode yet but I will this week with support. Everyone tells me that Simon has created this in such a caring, respectful and sensitive way. I always trusted Simon. I never knew anyone who had gone through any of this before. He's been my lifeline."

"Dear Alana," is currently the No. 1 podcast on Apple Podcasts. All Catholic parents — and church leaders — should listen to it.

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 1-14, 2023** print issue under the headline: Sometimes LGBTQ issues are literally life and death.