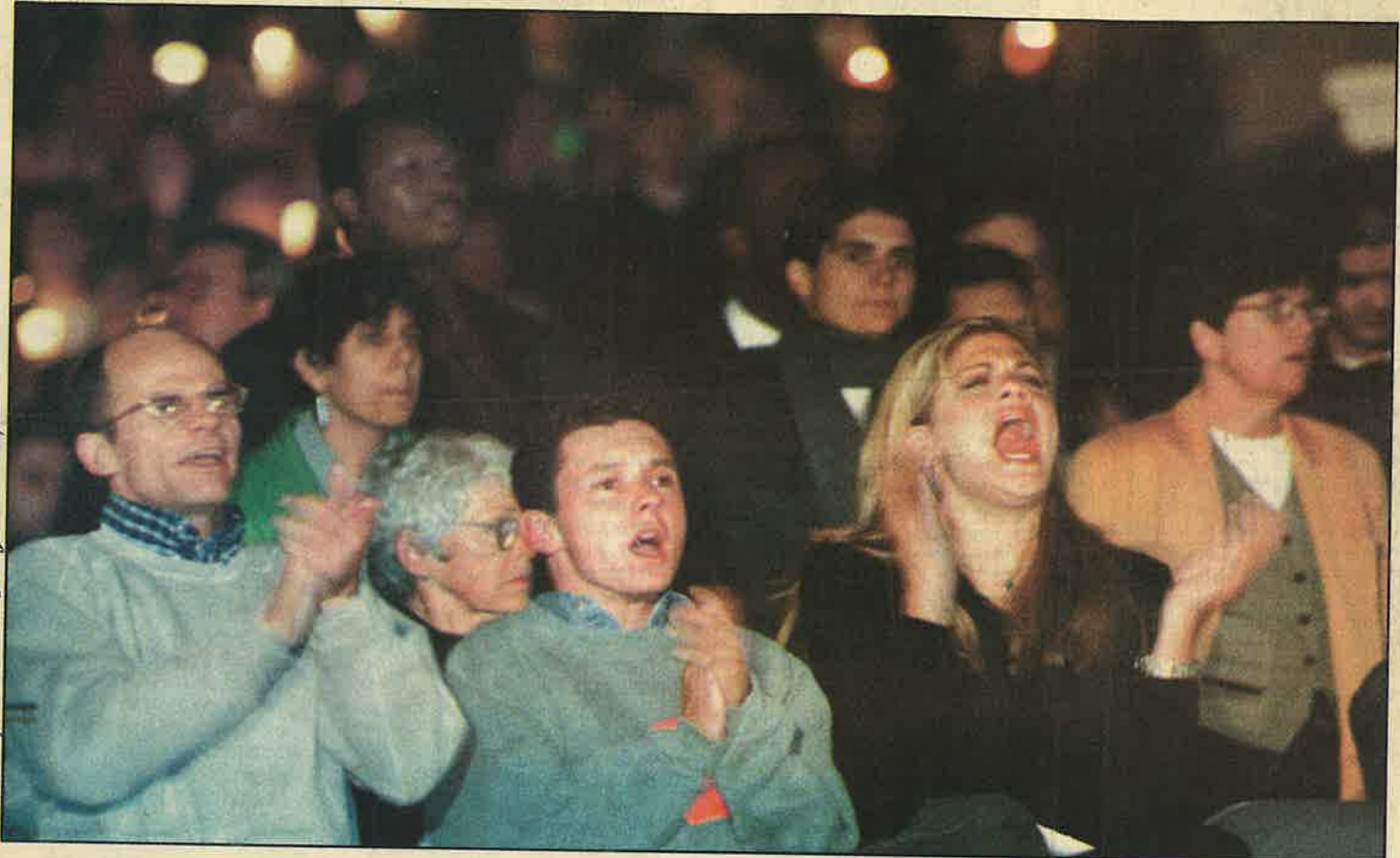


# Mourners push for hate-crime law



JUANA ARIAS/AP

Hundreds of people attend a candlelight vigil on the steps of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., to mourn the beating death of Matthew Shepard and to urge Congress to pass a hate-crimes bill before adjourning for the year Wednesday night. Among them are Walter Boulden, Alex Trout and actress Kristen Johnston from the television sitcom 'Third Rock from the Sun.'

alex trout  
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# Congressional leaders attend D.C. vigil

By the Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Amid chants of "Now, Now, Now," hundreds of people mourning the beating death of a gay University of Wyoming student on Wednesday urged Congress to pass a stalled hate crimes bill before adjourning for the year.

"We take issue with those who say that we don't need these laws," said House Democratic Leader Richard Gephardt of Missouri, echoing the sentiments of several speakers at a candlelight vigil in memory of 21-year-old Matthew Shepard.

"Pass hate crimes legislation," added Rep. Mark Foley, R-Fla.

Shepard died Monday at a Fort Collins, Colo., hospital, five days after he was found pistol-whipped and tied to a fence in near-freezing temperatures outside Laramie.

His death has become a rallying point for gays and lesbians nationwide seeking state and federal legislation to protect them from discrimination.

A hate crimes bill introduced in Congress this year would broaden existing law to cover offenses motivated by a person's gender, disability and sexual orientation, and would make it easier for federal authorities to step in and prosecute

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# HATE: Religious leaders rally

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such crimes.

Congress has not acted on the bill, other than to hold hearings.

"I can't stop crying," said an emotional Ellen DeGeneres, whose network television sitcom, "Ellen," was canceled after her character announced she was a lesbian. "This is what I was trying to stop."

More than 1,000 people attended the vigil on the steps of the Capitol overlooking the National Mall and its monuments. They held candles with flames that flickered in the wind, or neon green glow-in-the-dark lights distributed by the Human Rights Campaign, a national political advocacy group for gays and lesbians.

Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., an openly gay member of Congress, told the vigil participants to learn the positions on gay and lesbian issues of every candidate running for election next month. "We can protect ourselves with our vote in November," he said.

"We need to send the strongest possible signal as a nation that these crimes will not be tolerated in the United States," added Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., a sponsor of the hate crimes bill in the Senate.

Attorney General Janet Reno met for more than an hour Wednesday with representatives of more than a dozen gay and lesbian groups and renewed her call for Congress to pass the hate crimes bill. Reno has ordered U.S. attorneys across the country to establish hate-crime working groups with state and local authorities in their jurisdictions.

Earlier Wednesday, religious leaders across the country held demonstrations and rallies.

In downtown Chicago, an Episcopal pastor offered a prayer of condolence and healing during a lunchtime service. In San Francisco, hundreds of people walked from an interdenominational memorial service at a Catholic church to take cards, flowers and letters to a makeshift monument.

From Washington and Dallas to Decatur and Morris, Minn., religious leaders and activists say they hope their impromptu prayers, vigils and memorial services will counter what they call

a wave of anti-gay sentiment that has continued even after the death of Shepard.

Some religious leaders are particularly alarmed by a Kansas pastor's plan to picket Shepard's funeral in Casper on Friday with signs that read, among other things, "No tears for queers."

"Evil exists, even in the religious community, and tries to mask itself as light," the Rev. Ted Curtis said after Wednesday's service at Grace Episcopal Church in Chicago.

He called the plan of Rev. Fred Phelps of Topeka, Kan., "mean-spirited and hateful."

"But it will never win," he added.

Some gay activists — who have received hate mail calling for more violence — are going as far as to link Shepard's death to conservative Christian groups that funded a national ad campaign this summer claiming that homosexuality could be overcome with prayer.

"Anti-gay rhetoric fuels and feeds anti-gay violence," said Rick Garcia, who heads the Illinois Federation for Human Rights.

Members of Christian groups balked at such statements.

"Murderous thugs killed Matthew Shepard, not the millions of pro-family Americans who believe homosexual behavior is wrong and who support the Christian message that 'gays' can change," Peter LaBarbera, president of Americans for Truth, said in a statement Tuesday.

Churches and community groups across the country held prayer vigils last Sunday as Shepard, who suffered serious head injuries, lay in a hospital bed in Fort Collins, Colo. Since his death Monday, community groups — many of them led by gay and lesbian students, as well as pastors — have begun organizing the vigils.

Thomas VanEtten, who helped plan San Francisco's service on Tuesday with his longtime partner, Robert VanEtten, said he was heartened that about 500 people showed up.

"I think people were looking for healing and for a way to make a difference ... instead of screaming and shouting," said VanEtten, a member of Most

Holy Redeemer Catholic Church where the vigil began.

"Let's give Matthew Shepard's life meaning. We must not let an act of violence like this end without it becoming a beacon of hope."

"How in the name of God can we stop this? What in the name of God brings on such brutality?" asked Bishop Frederick H. Borsch of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles at a demonstration outside the downtown Los Angeles federal building.

"The message has been heard loud and clear: that it is not safe to be lesbian, gay or bisexual. There is a whole new generation of haters being raised up," said the Rev. Frank Wulf, a minister at the University of California, Los Angeles.

The Rev. Petra Verwijs of the University of California, Riverside, said gay students have been "incredibly fearful" since the Wyoming beating death.

"They feel like they've lost a peer, and they think it could easily have been them," she said.

They were among some 40 religious leaders urging congressional approval of hate crime legislation.

Rabbi Larry Goldmark, president of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California, said in Los Angeles on Wednesday that a federal hate crime law was necessary "to show that we as a nation will not tolerate such evilness, no matter what their race, ethnicity or sexual orientation."

In Chicago, more than 500 people gathered Wednesday evening for a candlelight vigil in the North Side neighborhood where a suburban man was recently beaten in what authorities say was likely an anti-gay hate crime.

Jocelyn Glicklich, 24, from Chicago said she came in part to remember Shepard and also because she and her girlfriend were recently harassed by teenagers on a bus.

"Recently, the two of us have realized this is a real thing. It's just really hit home, Glicklich said. "It's important that everyone realize that we still have a long way to go."

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