

No home for hate at Homecoming

Hundreds march in support of gay victim

By JEFF TOLLEFSON
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LARAMIE — After the horns had finished honking, the fraternity and sorority floats had passed, blaring tunes and tossing candy to the young ones, a deep silence set in Saturday as protesters of the brutal beating of Matt Shepard marched in silence at the University of Wyoming Homecoming Parade.

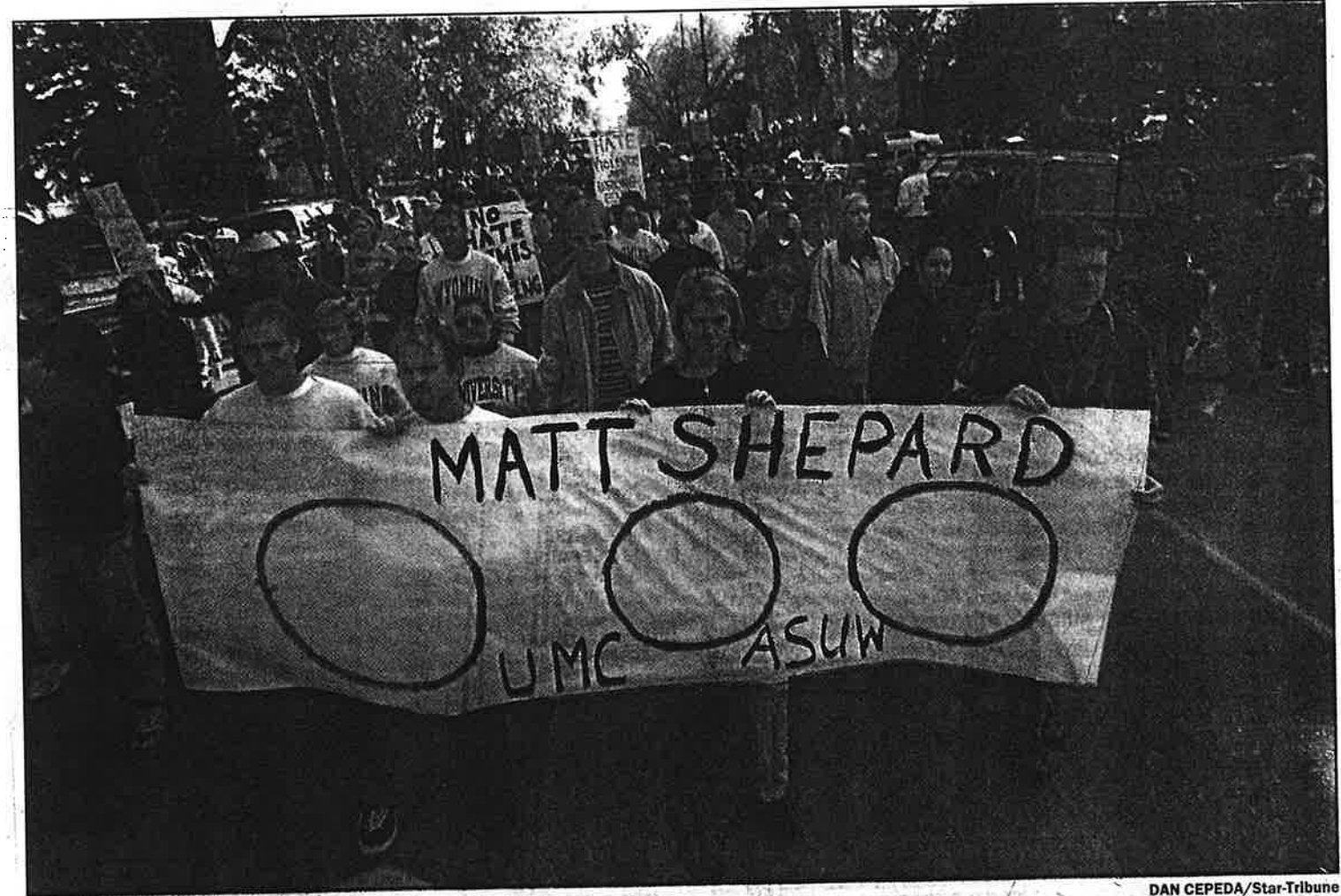
Though law enforcement authorities have been reluctant to confirm homophobia as

the primary motive in the attack of the openly gay UW student — citing intent to rob Shepard — the Laramie community as well as university students and faculty seem to have no doubt as to why Shepard was tied to a fence, tortured and left for dead late Tuesday.

About 100 protesters wearing yellow armbands with green circles — symbolizing peace — marched in silence behind a banner bearing Shepard's name. They carried signs reading "Hate is not a Wyoming value;" "Straight but not stupid;" "Wake up Wyo, hate happens right here;" and "Is this what equality feels like?"

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DAN CEPEDA/Star-Tribune

Marchers at the UW Homecoming Saturday carry a banner with circles symbolizing peace, in support of Matthew Shepard.

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Marching last in the parade, the protesters picked up people as they went, more than tripling in size by the end of the parade. As they passed, the smiles disappeared and the sidewalk crowds often clapped softly, offering weak but welcome support for this solemn expression of outrage at an act of violence that has shocked the nation.

The entire UW marching band also wore ribbons, as did most student participants, political candidates, former Gov. Mike Sullivan, UW President Phil Dubois and other officials.

A pink Cadillac float with the words "Good times in Wyoming" and another blasting the "Happy Days" theme song were contrasted with last-minute signs reading "Teach tolerance" and "Thoughts and prayers are with you Matthew."

After watching the protesters march past, UW senior Danielle Clawson, 21, called the attack a "wake up call" for Wyoming. She and some friends agreed that the beating is not indicative of Wyoming's ethics.

"How many people showed up (for the protest march), reflects the support Matt has in this community," said Tristan Johnson, 21, of Cheyenne.

UW professor Peter Shive, who joined the march as it passed, and said that during his thirty years in Laramie, this event is the worst he has heard of.

"This is the first time that I've ever felt embarrassed to live here," he said.

Prior to the Cowboy's football game against Southern Methodist University, the students celebrated to music. Alcohol was apparent in the festivities, but many wore the yellow bands as a reminder of the tragedy. Before singing the "Star Spangled Banner," a moment of silence was observed.

Students and faculty differed on exactly what, if anything, this brutality says about Laramie and Wyoming.

"I think it shows that there is hate. I don't think you necessarily see it, but it's there," said Dale Hottle, 20, who was wearing a yellow band. He said the arm bands are a way for Laramie to unite against violence.

'...even in the 'Betty Crocker' part of the nation, you still have this hate.'

REBECCA HOEN, UW STUDENT

Considering the onslaught of national media in Laramie, Hottle said "the more the better. It just lets that many more people out there know that there's a problem."

UW freshman Rebecca Hoen, 18, of Albany, N.Y., concurred, saying that her parents called her asking about the incident. She said the news needs to get out to everybody, because "even in the 'Betty Crocker' part of the nation, you still have this hate."

She added that it should "definitely get more attention than the whole Clinton thing."

Hoen, who said she has always felt safe in Laramie, said, "It's something you would never imagine that would happen here."

Though she and friend Traci Swint, 19, of Grants Pass, Ore., agreed that many Wyomingites can seem a little close-minded — not prejudiced, per se — they said that probably is because Wyoming's population simply lacks diversity.

But Hoen said the recent attack has "nothing to do with Wyoming." In her hometown, where people are much more open to different attitudes, one still encounters homophobia.

UW student Alan Lau, 23, moved to Cheyenne from Hong Kong when he was 15. While expressing surprise that such a brutal incident could occur here, he said Wyoming can be sometimes be cold towards minorities, simply because there aren't that many.

But he has never felt that those attitudes were dangerous, or even mean, necessarily. He explained that he's never had a problem with prejudice, but, in some cases, has felt that he wasn't quite accepted.

"Just because they don't call you names and they don't beat you up doesn't mean they really accept you," he said.