

Murder of Matthew Shepard still affects people in ways both subtle and obvious

by Nate Green
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"They beat you and they tied you/They left you cold and breathing/For love they crucified you ... Scarecrow crying/Waiting to die wondering why/Scarecrow trying/Rising above all in the name of love"

— from Grammy-winning singer Melissa Etheridge's "Scarecrow," dedicated to the memory of Matthew Shepard

"People often hear the term 'the Matthew Shepard tragedy' and they think of it as this kind of nebulous event, something that is almost surreal. ... It's a household term almost. Behind the household term was a young man's life. Matthew Shepard was not an icon for gay rights. He was a 21-year-old boy, barely a man in some respects, who went to school, did his laundry, spent time with friends, listened to music, collected glass bottles. ..."

— Jim Osborn, University of Wyoming's Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Association advisor

Three months ago Ronnie Gustafson and Alex Trout visited the fence east of Laramie where their friend's body was left in the cold, bloody and battered.

It was the buck fence that has been pictured on the cover of Time Magazine and compared to a site of crucifixion. It was never meant to do much more than keep in cattle and mark a property line, but for many it is now part of the image they see when they hear "Laramie, Wyo."

It was the first time Gustafson visited the site. Trout had been there once, before moving to Kansas City, Mo. He left a few weeks after the murder to get away from the fear he said he felt here.

Trout said if he had stayed, he would probably visit the site regularly. "It kind of keeps Matt alive," he said.

They had been good friends. "The three caballeros," Gustafson said.

Gustafson had gone on a couple dates with Shepard the spring before the murder — they wrote each other e-mail that summer, Shepard encouraging Gustafson to pur-

sue an acting career. And they'd been active in the campus gay organization. Trout knew Shepard in Casper where they'd been good friends, he said.

"It finally put some closure on everything," Gustafson said, talking about the visit to the fence. "I started crying. I was very touched at how people had kept the place up. There was a little plaque out there and some flowers and a cross. The warmest feeling came over me and I reached out and touched the wood that he was hanging on. And this breeze came up out of nowhere. It was a very moving experience, almost as if Matt was there comforting us."

Shepard died in a hospital Oct. 12, 1998. He had been found five days earlier, after being hit so many times with the butt end of a pistol that his skull was crushed. His shoes were missing and he was in a coma, barely breathing. The bicyclist who found his small body — just over five feet tall and barely weighing over one hundred pounds — at first thought he was a scarecrow.

Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney allegedly left a Laramie bar with Shepard the night of Oct. 6, 1998, beat him, tied him to the fence, and stole \$20, his shoes and his jacket.

Henderson, 22, pleaded guilty in April to Shepard's murder and is serving life in prison. Jury selection for the trial of McKinney, 22, begins Monday, Oct. 11, which is also "National Coming Out Day."

People have been murdered in Laramie before Shepard. Gay people have been attacked in brutal ways all over the world throughout history. But because of national and international media coverage, Shepard's death has grown into something larger. In the past year, Laramie has been presented in newspapers and on television shows. Consequently, Shepard has gone from being a University of Wyoming student, a friend, a son, and a brother, to a call for strength in the gay rights movement.

Cathy Renna, of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, a New York City organization that works with the media to present a positive image of gays, said the

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reason reporters grabbed onto the Shepard murder was both timing and Shepard's unique personality.

When Renna found out about the beating, she had just attended a meeting at which they discussed ways to combat anti-gay advertisements being televised for the first time that day. Right-wing Christian groups were trying to push gays back into the closet, she said, and gays were ready to push back.

The way Shepard was portrayed brought them to action.

"He seemed kind of defenseless. He presented a very safe image of gay people. That's what affected people," she said. "He could have been the boy next door. He looked like Leonardo DiCaprio, and the media jumped all over that."

Beverly Seckinger, a former University of Wyoming student who's working on a documentary about the murder, said the image of Shepard, "a slight, unimposing young man," juxtaposed with the extreme brutality of his murder created a startling image that is hard to forget.

"He was a person that mom and pop next door couldn't dismiss as a heathen, as some degenerate, awful person you would never know," she said.

In Laramie and Wyoming, many saw the murder as horrible, but not necessarily worse than others in the state, such as the stabbing of pregnant teenager Daphne Sulk. And it wasn't merely the media's intense coverage of the story that upset some locals, but the way they covered it. Much was made of Wyoming being the "Cowboy State," and Laramie being divided by sharp economic class lines. One correspondent opening a segment on NBC Nightly News outside a local bar said, "Patrons said hate is easy to find here."

"Nobody knew about Laramie, Wyo. Nobody had any idea we existed. This happened and people said 'we don't know anything about this place, but look at it — it's evil,'" said UW student Jessica Johnston, who used to see Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney at parties in high school. When she and her friends were approached by television reporters, they'd turn their backs and walk away.

Jim Osborn, the advisor of UW's gay organization, which was formed in the 1970's, said it was disturbing to see the stereotypes of Wyoming reporters used to make stories.

"Laramie was portrayed as a backwater, archaic, frontier town, where cowboys ride around high on the saddle with shotguns, going around distributing vigilante justice with a noose. That's not the sort of thing that takes place here. That's not our home," Jim Osborn said. Murders and anti-gay violence are actually rare here, he added, especially compared to metropolitan areas.

Jay Fromkin, UW's media liaison, said it is the nature of reporters to come into an area for a brief time, and leave with their impressions. But sometimes those impressions put Laramie in a bad light, he added.

"It is very easy to view the community through preconceived notions and I think there are some reporters who did just that," he said.

Fromkin said initially a news organization wrongly reported Shepard had been attacked by UW students. His office notified newspapers and television stations that statement was not true.

Over the past year, he said he's answered some 500 e-mails and phone calls from reporters and people sending condolences or put-downs.

"I thought it was ironic that one of those messages that was most vitriolic came from some one in Texas who said the entire state of Wyoming is responsible for the death of Matthew Shepard and I wrote back and asked him if he would take responsibility in the murder of James Byrd," Fromkin said.

Shannon Rexroat, who was edi-

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tor of the Branding Iron campus newspaper during Shepard's murder, used to dream of working for a major newspaper. Her experience with the media changed her mind. Rexroat said she answered reporters' phone calls at all hours of the night, her staff fell apart trying to help national media, and her home state was degraded by the very people she aspired to work with.

"It made me mad. To pick up magazines that you're used to picking up and admiring, as someone who wants to be a journalist," she said. "They come into town and take pictures of this fence from the angle that makes it look like it's in this empty wasteland, this place called Wyoming, when really that's not what it is."

Rexroat also answered hundreds of e-mails and telephone calls. The first e-mail she read was from a gay man in Australia who wrote how badly he felt for Laramie, and it brought her to tears.

Renna, of the gay media organization, agreed Laramie was unfairly portrayed. "As an activist I found myself not working only toward the fair coverage of the murder, I was trying to say to the media, 'I've never been here before in my life and I show up and I am embraced by this community. They did everything they could to recognize the tragedy and stand up and speak about it,'" she said.

The community reacted to Shepard's murder and the news coverage by holding candlelight vigils, prayer sessions, and town meetings. Professors held teach-ins in Prexy's Pasture to discuss tolerance. Students wore yellow ribbons with green peace signs. State and local politicians issued statements expressing sorrow and calling for tolerance.

For UW's small gay population — less than 20 people regularly attended group meetings — it was an especially difficult time. In addition to grieving the loss of a friend, they had to attend classes, organize the regularly scheduled gay awareness week, and answer to the media. For many it meant being transported to television sets across the country as representatives of gay Wyoming.

"It's a double-edged sword. It's an opportunity for our concerns to be voiced. It's an opportunity for us to express our outrage and our pain at the death of our friend. But by the same token it's a very risky proposition. That means coming out to family and friends in many cases, as well as being in the public eye and opening yourself up as a target," Osborn said.

When news of Shepard's death spread across campus, students became tense, said Chris Gibson, a sophomore art major.

"There was an aura of uncomfortableness. If you said something wrong you felt like somebody was going to jump on you. One of my friends, we call him 'Gay Dave,' because he's always happy. But we felt ashamed to say his name in public because of what people might think," he said. "Things have loosened up since then, and people have become more open. But I see a lot of Confederate flags flying around and gay bashing still."

Jon Gardzelewski was in a fraternity at UW when Shepard was killed. The situation was never as bad as at a fraternity in Colorado State University, where students placed a scarecrow mocking Shepard on a homecoming float, he said, but they weren't exactly sympathetic to the situation either.

"Unfortunately they were the kind of people who took it upon themselves to make jokes and start mocking the situation. It was a lot of b.s. At the time I didn't say much or state my opinion. I was kind of gutless, but now, the more I think about it, I wish I would have said more," Gardzelewski said.

As a teacher's aide for a freshmen orientation class this semester, Gardzelewski said he tries to raise awareness of minority groups. He has encouraged the students to see the UW production

"Angels in America", a Pulitzer- and Tony Award-winning play about being gay during the AIDS epidemic, that's playing through Wednesday.

Jed Schultz, a student who plays a gay man who dies of AIDS in "Angels in America," said he had to leave Laramie to learn how to play his part. He got the chance this summer when he acted in a theater program near Seattle.

"Being able to leave Laramie for the first time in my life opened me to what homosexual life and gay culture is about. That's what sucks about Laramie is that we're not open about these things. And I think that's what we're trying to do with the play, bring a small part of gay culture to Laramie, and believe me, it is a small part," Schultz said. "We're trying to make a negative into a positive."

Nathan Hammons, UW's student body president, said the murder has acted to bring the community together and discuss subjects that were once taboo.

"It opens up your values and your beliefs to everybody and makes you question them. I think in a sense that can be positive and negative, depending on how it's addressed. And that's why I'm so proud of the community. When that issue was exposed, the community addressed it and didn't try to sweep it under the rug," he said.

But Gustafson said Laramie's support of gays has been short-lived.

"After Matt died it really opened peoples' minds to acceptance, but I can honestly say that has worn off.

The extra support people seemed to tell us they gave, I think a great deal of that has gone away. It's difficult for me to talk about. I like Laramie but I don't think it's anywhere near what it should be in the way of tolerance of gays," Gustafson said.

"They say it, they preach it a lot. 'Laramie's very tolerant and blah blah blah.' But when I'm still getting called faggot and when I'm still getting looks when I walk down the street, or when I want to be with a man in public and I still get looks, I don't call that tolerance. It's liveable but it's not the best, not what it should be," he continued.

Walt Boulden, another of Shepard's friends, wrote his doctoral dissertation on what it means to be gay and live in Wyoming. He said Laramie is still a "hick town" and that Wyoming politicians give a "lot of lip service" to diversity but still hold prejudices. He said Wyoming is "heterosexist" — it's alright if you're gay as long as you pretend that you're straight.

"Wyoming is the epitome of don't ask, don't tell," he said.

Boulden is especially bitter about the state's failure to pass hate crime legislation, which would punish people for committing crimes against minorities motivated by prejudice. After the murder, 22 state governments, including Wyoming, considered hate crime legislation based on sexual orientation, but only Missouri passed such laws.

Boulden, like Alex Trout, moved to Missouri shortly after

Shepard's death. The difference between a hate crime and a regular crime, Bouden said, is that a hate crime is meant to send a message to a group of people. Wyoming should have led the way in passing a hate crime bill, he said.

"The way Matt was killed touched the core of every nightmare of every gay man who has ever lived," he said.

Whether or not people in Laramie have become more open in their views on homosexuality, there have been changes here since Shepard's death. Membership in the campus gay group has increased. Membership in the state's gay organization has nearly doubled to about 250.

In September, Laramie was awarded a multi-million dollar grant to fund youth programs over the next three years. The grant proposal described Laramie as the place where Shepard was killed, and mentioned Russell Henderson as an upstanding Boy Scout before "slipping through the cracks."

The university has made an effort to include sexual preference in its discrimination and harassment policies and plans to raise \$1.5 million to endow the Matthew Shepard Chair of Civil Liberties.

A June concert by Elton John raised about \$55,000 for gay groups. A memorial concert is scheduled in Laramie from Peter, Paul, and Mary, and documentaries are being made on the murder.

Judy Shepard, Matthew's mother, is featured daily on MTV public service announcements, asking young viewers to steer

away from anti-gay speech. She has also spoken in favor of hate crime laws.

Renna said Shepard's death will go down as a defining moment in the history of gay rights on an international scale. Not only did it bring a renewed sense of purpose to gay groups, it has made straight people think and talk about the issues of homosexuality and gay bashing.

Attorney General Janet Reno and President Clinton, as well as presidential candidates Bill Bradley and Al Gore, have called for federal hate-crimes legislation. And Renna said gays are represented and respected in popular culture like never before.

"On a deep level, this has affected the American public. It has become dinner table conversation. It is difficult, but I know in my heart that this is the way society works. This wouldn't have happened without a tragedy like this," she said.

Trout said his friend's death "brought out the activist" in him and other gays across the country. He called Shepard a "gay martyr," and said he doesn't mind the way gay groups use his death to further their cause. Shepard cared about human and gay rights and would have liked to see the positive changes that have come after his death, he said.

"Do I think he deserved to die for every gay and lesbian in the U.S.? No," he said, "but Matt would have wanted what's happened to happen."