

REFLECTIONS ON A TRAGEDY

by Milton D. Ontiveroz

On Oct. 7, 1998 a University of Wyoming student riding his mountain bike on a trail above the Sherman Hills subdivision east of Laramie saw what he said he thought was a scarecrow lashed to a rail fence. That "scarecrow" was the broken and bloodied body of Matthew Shepard, a UW student from Casper.

During the past year, millions of words have been written, and thousands of hours of airtime have been broadcast, about the murder of Matthew Shepard. Even as facts of the crime have been debated, reporters, columnists, commentators, psychologists, sociologists, criminologists, politicians, lawyers, gay-rights activists and gay-rights opponents have sought to tie the "why" to the "what." Long-time Wyoming residents and casual visitors to Laramie have described and psychoanalyzed the state and community with varying degrees of accuracy. Experts have not been in short supply. For people throughout the world, this terrible crime became a lens through which they could focus their own grief, fear, and hope. Laramie was on the other side of that lens.

With the exception of the Shepard family, from the discovery of the beating through the aborted trial of Russell Henderson, no group of individuals lived with this tragedy more than did the University of Wyoming community. They were not only residents of Laramie, but also members of the same UW family to which Shepard belonged for a too-brief period of time. They lived with the finger-pointing and the self doubts, trying to reconcile what others said about their community with what they believed to be true. This is the first time the Matthew Shepard murder and its aftermath has been described through the eyes and memories of people at UW who lived the crisis every day. We are grateful to them for their contributions to this article.

WHO IS IT?

Father Roger Schmit, pastor of the Newman Center, and a member of the UW/Community Crisis Intervention Team, first informed Jim Hurst, UW vice president for student affairs, that a young male had been found badly beaten east of town. That phone call came after 10 p.m. on Oct. 7.

"Father Roger didn't know whether or not he was a college student, and that rather than take a chance he thought he would alert me. I put him on hold and called the university police. The officer on duty at the time told me they had found a person, and knew who he was. He assured me he was not a university student. I asked whether they knew who the perpetrators were, and they did not, but they had some leads they were following. I concluded that the incident did not require any action from me – a beating, someone east of town found the victim, and he was in the hospital. I went to bed that night not thinking much about it. The next day, right around noon, I got a call from Bill Fruth, Wyoming Union director, who said he knew more about the incident. 'I just want to inform you that the person was a student,' he said, 'and his name is Matthew Shepard.' Later I learned his injuries were so severe that he had been transported to Fort Collins. The injuries

THE DEATH OF UW STUDENT MATTHEW SHEPARD TOUCHED THE LIVES OF THE CAMPUS COMMUNITY

were to his brain stem. As a psychologist, I know enough about how the brain operates that if there are injuries to the brain stem, severe long-term problems are typically the result.”

– *Jim Hurst,*
UW vice president for student affairs

PHONES NEVER STOPPED

“I knew we had a major incident when the teaser that night on Denver television said there had been a gay bashing in Laramie. By Friday morning, a dozen voicemails were already on my telephone from major media outlets wanting to know about the beating. Telephones in our offices never stopped ringing throughout the day. To compound the issue, an early, nationally-circulated wire story identified the perpetrators as UW students. This meant that we had to reach as many media sources as possible with correct information, as well as respond to requests for information about Shepard – working with television crews, setting up interviews, finding locations for their satellite uplink trucks, providing computers for sending stories, and other needs. To meet the demand for access to President Dubois, we arranged for a news conference that afternoon in front of the Albany County Courthouse where Dubois and others were able to answer questions from many media outlets at one time.”

– *Jim Kearns,*
UW News Service manager

MEDIA FOCUS

“We knew, when it was discovered that Matthew was gay, that we were going to get some media attention. I wouldn’t have guessed that we would get as much attention as eventually we received. However, when I contemplated the brutality of what went on there, the attention and concern of the entire country was predictable. It was in recognition of the nature of the tragedy that I began to understand why there was so much attention here, but hon-

estly, initially, I was a little bit surprised. On that Friday we were inundated with calls. The media converged on the campus and community, and press vehicles, trucks with satellite dishes mounted on their tops, and legions of reporters and equipment seemed to fill Prexy’s Pasture and the rest of the campus.”

– *Jim Hurst*

SYMBOL AGAINST HATE

“The day when most people learned about the tragedy, the campus United Multicultural Council (UMC) members decided that one of their responses to the tragedy would be to create something tangible that would unite the UW community. The group decided that an armband was a symbol of unification against hate and violence of any kind. The armbands were yellow, the same color used during the Oklahoma City bombing tragedy, and the color associated with peace. To make the



armbands distinguishable, a green circle was used, which also is the international symbol for peace. We worked until about 2 a.m. producing 800 additional armbands after the first ones were passed out at the Homecoming Sing.

We were having trouble keeping up with the demand. I received calls from people across the country who wanted to have an armband or two sent to them. The armband reminds me of the magnitude of the tragedy and how it affected the community. It reminds me of the injustices and acts of violence that take place everyday in this world.

It reminds me of the work that is left to be done in order to make the world peaceful. And, mostly, it reminds me of Matthew Shepard, a man I never knew, but a man who brought about change in my life.”

– *David Rivera,*
former UMC member

UW PORTRAYED UNFAIRLY

“The Campus Activities Center saw more students than usual after the tragedy occurred. Many of UW’s student organizations wanted to respond to the tragedy in some manner. They wanted to support our LGBTTA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered Association) members and organization. They wanted to provide opportunities for students to process the horrible event that had put our campus, community, and state in the nation’s eye.

In addition, many student organizations were adamant that they wanted to prove to the world that UW, Laramie and Wyoming were not awful places to live. Many students were appalled at the regional and national media coverage of Matthew’s death. They felt we were being portrayed unfairly. I believe that it was the glaring untruths that had our students upset at media coverage and motivated them to take action.”

– *Cynthia Haarstad-Darrow,*
Campus Activities Center coordinator

TEACHING TOLERANCE

“I attended all three teach-ins, and was a presenter in one of them. In my own class on gender and society, I am surprised by the number of students who will say, ‘Well, my religion doesn’t approve of ...whatever...’ What I think people learned from the teach-ins was a willingness to talk about these issues in open forums, to hear several perspectives on these issues of gender and sexual identity, and know that it is okay to have open discussions about sexuality and personal identity.”

– *Patricia Taylor,*
professor of sociology

A SOMBER HOMECOMING

"People simply left the curb and joined with us, doubling, tripling, the numbers of those who marched in solidarity with the notions of openness, tolerance, and equality. It was a moving experience to be a participant in a parade that combined the celebratory mood of homecoming with the solemn mood of the Matthew Shepard marchers who walked as I did to express the responsibility each of us bears in our communities for upholding the principles of equality in our nation's Constitution. In this march, together, we could witness the mixture of life's joys and horrors all at the same time. I don't think I've gotten over the tragedy. The terrible violence done to Matthew Shepard, and therefore to his family and friends, and to our community, comes quickly to mind with strong emotional impact when I recall those days."

— *Lew Bagby,*

UW International Programs director

ATHLETES HONOR SHEPARD

"Regarding the symbol on the uniforms and helmets — it was the decision of each team to wear them. Every one of the players did so. The football team wore the yellow mark with the green circle on its headgear. The women's teams wore yellow ribbons with the green circle in their hair. The homecoming opponent was SMU, and I remember it was a very solemn moment, and it was one of the most unifying moments I can recall in the stadium. You had the feeling that everyone in there felt as one."

— *Kevin McKinney,*

UW Sports Information coordinator



PRAYER VIGIL

"I decided to take my family to the candlelight vigil for two reasons. Most importantly, I wanted my children to participate and to learn from the experience. I also thought that our presence there as a family would be a significant symbolic statement for members of the university community that ending hate and violence was a matter of concern for everyone. The attack on Matthew Shepard wasn't — and isn't — something that affects only the gay community. It should concern each member of every family."

Before I was asked to speak, I was kneeling on the grass with my arms wrapped around my daughter, Ali, and helping her to keep her candle lit. Lisa and our two boys, Taylor and Logan, were right behind us. It flashed upon me how lucky I was to have three happy and healthy kids, and that what happened to Matthew could easily have happened to one of our two boys. This could have been my son. That was a

pretty sobering thought at the moment, and it has stayed with me since.

When we pulled up to the Newman Center, I was really surprised by the size of the crowd. In fact, I had to actually weave my way through it to find Father Roger (Schmit). My kids, who initially weren't quite sure what they were being dragged to by their father, instantly appreciated the seriousness of the event. I was really proud of them. During my remarks, I glanced down to see how they were doing. That pretty much blew whatever composure I was trying to maintain."

— *Philip L. Dubois,*
UW president

SHEPARD'S FUNERAL

"We were warned about the events that might take place at the funeral. A group of anti-gay activists from Kansas would be present and what we might see would be horrific. They were there and their message was beyond horrific. I felt sick and saddened by their message. Matthew's family, loved ones, and friends did not deserve this. The funeral was crowded. I held back tears, remembering the tragedy. One of Matthew's relatives conducted the service and it was healing and peaceful to hear her speak about him and his life. She assured us that he is in a far better place. After the funeral we went to a reception and met with Matthew's family. I have never been as impressed by strength and grace, as I was by Matthew's mother and father. They greeted each person without hesitation. They represented Matthew and all he had to offer."

— *Stephanie Olson,*
UW student

