

REMARKS FOR CANDLELIGHT VIGIL

Oct. 10, 1999

Philip L. Dubois

President, University of Wyoming

Can it be only a year since we gathered together like this, candles in hand, our thoughts on Matthew Shepard? That night, last year, we stood on the lawn of the Newman Center, our sorrow and anger at the crime mixed with hope that Matt would survive. Just a few hours after the candles had gone out, we learned that Matthew had lost his battle in Fort Collins. One year ago.

During the past year, under the sometimes-withering scrutiny of the national media, we learned a lot about ourselves. We learned how well our students respond to intolerance and injustice. We learned how well our faculty and staff respond to the emotional and educational needs of our students. We learned just how important it was for our community to speak with one voice in rejecting violence and hate.

We also learned that in any town, in any state, in any nation, there are those who don't share our values of acceptance and inclusion. And we learned that there are those who will exploit the most horrible of tragedies for their own ends.

Tonight, through this vigil and through the inspirational music of Peter, Paul and Mary, we celebrate the resiliency of a community and its commitment to the values we hold dear. Tomorrow, we again will endure the hateful message of the Westboro Baptist Church. We plan to ignore them, to starve through active indifference their attempt to divide us. And throughout the coming weeks, as the trial unfolds, we will again endure the scrutiny of strangers who think they know what Laramie and Wyoming are all about.

I've only been here for two and a half years, so I can't presume to speak for this city or this state. But I know that Laramie is rich with people like you who have joined here tonight. This is a good and decent place.

And I know that Wyoming is composed of people with passion and with character, like Judy and Dennis Shepard, who have demonstrated the qualities of quiet courage and dignity to which we should all aspire.

And I know that this university includes faculty, staff, and students who, last year at this time, lead by example in expressing their concern about, and outrage over, what happened here—people like my friend Jim Osborn who have demonstrated the courage to come out, and to speak out.

During the past year, people have asked me, time after time, whether the events of the past year have changed the University of Wyoming and the city of Laramie. I tell them they have not, because I learned early on that we are a good and caring community. Nothing I observed in the wake of Matthew's death has changed my opinion.

We know we aren't perfect, and we know that we have a ways to go until all members of our community feel that this is a place where they are accepted and safe. But we know what we have to do, and I believe we are up to the challenge.



UW President Philip L. Dubois speaks at the Candlelight Vigil held Oct. 10 in remembrance of the death of Matthew Shepard one year ago.

This is where I choose to be. This is where Lisa and I choose to raise our children. We are grateful to have you as our friends and neighbors.

But one of our friends is missing, and tonight we remember him. And we wish that, like us, he was preparing to welcome Peter, Paul and Mary to campus and embrace their abiding commitment to justice and peace.

So, let us remember this young man, not as a martyr or as a symbol, but as a son and a brother; not with sorrow but with our own commitment to justice and peace; not with the overpowering sadness we felt last year at this time, but with hope for a renewed commitment to the belief that our diversity is our strength.

Tonight, each of us will light one candle in memory of Matt. Each of our candles will generate only a tiny bit of heat and energy along the road to a world that rejects prejudice, stereotypes, hatred, and violence, but their combined force will light a highway of hope.

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