

Managing a Tragedy: The Death of Mathew Shepard

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The Essence of a Tragedy

On Wednesday evening, October 5, 1998, approximately 3 miles east of Laramie, Wyoming a 21-year old University of Wyoming student from Casper, Wyoming was found robbed, severely beaten, and tied to a buck fence. Two Laramie residents were quickly charged with "attempted murder" in the attack that has been labeled a hate crime. In addition, the defendant's girlfriends were charged as "accessories after the fact" in connection with the crime.

On Thursday evening, October 6, 1998, the beating of Matthew Shepard was the headline story on the NBC Denver affiliate television station. In the scene behind, the TV reporter viewers caught glimpses of the Wyoming Union. By Friday, October 7, 1998, the story was broadcast nationally on all three major networks. It was at this point the Wyoming Union, in addition to being a hub of the campus community, became a focal point for local, regional, national and international media.

The Role of the Wyoming Union

Like any other college or university union, the Wyoming Union is a central point of daily campus life. The Union is located in the heart of the campus with approximately 10,000 people passing through on a daily basis. At first news of the attack on Matthew Shepard, the Wyoming Union provided a foundation for the University's and students' reactions.

The Union's key offices provided leadership for organizing student efforts, student responses, and programming which occurred during the turmoil surrounding the Matthew Shepard tragedy. Located within the Union is the Campus Activities Center (CAC). The CAC is comprised of a range of offices including the Union's administrative offices, student activities, and student government. It quickly became a center of activity following the discovery of Matthew Shepard. Students gathered in the CAC to process the horror of the incident. Like everyone in the Laramie community, students were trying to understand what had occurred, why it had occurred, and how such a brutal event could possibly happen to a peer. As the days unfolded, the media quickly identified the CAC and adjacent open gathering spaces as sites to gain information regarding campus and student responses. In addition, the CAC became a temporary office space for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered Association (LGBTQA) and its president, Jim Osborn. A myriad of activities in the CAC continued unabated for 12 consecutive days.

The Multicultural Resource Center (MRC), also located in the Wyoming Union, provided leadership for student responses. The United Multicultural Council (UMC), a student organization housed within the MRC, developed the armband concept that received national attention as a symbol of hope for peace and nonviolence. Working in conjunction with staff from the CAC, UW Office of Minority Affairs, and other diverse UW student organizations the MRC promoted and distributed the yellow and green armbands. The students of the MRC were a small, tireless army determined to respond to the attack of a member of UW's campus community.

So close to home

The Wyoming Union was closely connected to this event on a professional level due to the positive relationships nurtured between the CAC staff, Union staff, student leaders, student organizations and organization advisors. However, there was an additional dynamic that intensified the Union's staff involvement on a personal level. Chasity Pasley, the only UW student charged in connection with the crime, was a student employee in the CAC for 1-1/2 years. Pasley was a valued student employee having been recognized for her contributions as

an outstanding employee in a Union employee recognition program. Ms. Pasley's arrest and apparent involvement in the crime caused feelings of disappointment, frustration, and bewilderment among Union staff members. Clearly, the Wyoming Union staff's sense of involvement was challenged both professionally and personally.

Due to the police investigation of Chasity Pasley, the Union staff first became aware of the incident on the morning of Thursday, October 8, 1998 following the discovery of Matthew Shepard. Early that afternoon two phone calls were received informing Union staff of the specifics. The first call outlined the course of events surrounding the beating of Matthew Shepard and the likely charges against Pasley as "accessory after the fact, attempted murder". The second call, from a committee member of the CAC's Safe Zone Program, confirmed the sequence of events. This caller identified the victim as a gay UW student with membership in the LGBTA who was most likely victimized because of his sexual identity, and relayed the injuries sustained in the beating as life threatening. At this point, the Union staff had more information regarding Matthew Shepard than the majority of the campus and residential community.

At this time the Union entered a crisis management mode of operation. An emergency meeting was held with Union management and the Vice President of Student Affairs. Over the next several hours a number of meetings were held with full-time and student staff. These meetings consisted of sharing factual information, alerting staff to the likely possibility of media coverage, and instructing them to direct press to the University President, Vice President of Student Affairs, or the University Relations offices.

The Crisis Intervention Team

Late Thursday afternoon, the University called into action its Crisis Intervention Team, which is a standing team chaired by the Vice President of Student Affairs. Membership includes representatives from Housing and Residence Life, Counseling, Campus Police, University Relations, Minority Affairs, Student Life, and the Vice President of Administration and Finance.

However, given the extensive nature of the Matthew Shepard tragedy, the Crisis Intervention Team expanded to include representatives from the city of Laramie (i.e., mayor, city manager, police chief, and local pastors), ASUW Student Government, LGBTA, CAC, and the Vice President of Academic Affairs. The Crisis Intervention Team met daily to address the following issues: media management, rumor control, accurate information dissemination, coordination of appropriate programming, appropriate use of Homecoming events to acknowledge the Matthew Shepard tragedy, student involvement in managing the crisis, role of faculty in classroom conversations, interactions with the Shepard family, requests for information and involvement from national and international levels, cooperation with the Laramie community, and how to acknowledge the grief and desire for involvement throughout the University and Laramie community.

Oh, by the way, it is Homecoming Week

Matthew Shepard was attacked on Tuesday, October 6, 1998 which also was the kickoff to Homecoming Week. The Campus Activities Center plays a significant role in planning Homecoming events and was deeply involved in the coordination of an array of activities at the time of the incident. Although the decision was made that Homecoming events would proceed, the week's activities carried a difficult, awkward and unsettled emotion.

On Friday, October 9, 1998, the United Multicultural Council (UMC) was determined to take action and make a statement. This group was not going to sit idly by as the rest of the world made judgements about UW, Laramie, and the state of Wyoming. It was at this noon meeting that the UMC developed the concept of the yellow armbands with green circles. By 5 p.m. that afternoon, yellow armbands were visible all across campus tied to arms, backpacks, trees, lightposts, and buildings.

(sidebar)

A Moment of Silence at the 63rd Annual UW Homecoming Sing

I am sure that most of you know the tragedy that has occurred in our community. It has shaken the lives of many people. Today, I would encourage us to recognize this tragedy. One way to do so is to wear the yellow armband that you may have seen some administrators, faculty, staff, and students wearing. The Sing participants will be wearing the same armbands tonight. The green circle is the international sign of PEACE. The yellow background is a symbol in tradition of the yellow ribbons distributed in response to the Oklahoma City bombing, speaking of the intolerance we have toward violence. Please display this ribbon, anywhere and everywhere - as an armband, on your backpack, etc. - as a display of your intolerance of this disgusting, abhorrent act of incivility toward Matthew Shepard. We wear this armband in a unified, nonviolent demonstration of our values as UW students and the UW community against any and all acts of violence and disrespect toward any human being.

The second way to recognize this tragedy would be to individually observe a moment of silence as we all stand in solidarity against prejudice and violence in ALL of its forms. And especially for the family of Matthew Shepard and all who are involved in this incident, that they may find comfort, hope, and the spirit of forgiveness.

- Rob Spaulding, ASUW Executive

The armbands became visible that evening at Homecoming events, the first of which was the annual Homecoming Sing. Prior to entering the performance location, UMC requested Sing participants to wear the armbands. Fourteen student organizations ranging in size from 15 to 70 members prominently displayed the armbands to an audience of 1900 students, staff, faculty, administrators, alumni, and campus visitors. The Sing coordinator, wearing a yellow armband, recognized the tragedy and its impact on the campus community by asking the audience to observe a moment of silence. It was a powerful and appropriate acknowledgement and response.

Later that night, students preparing to march in the Homecoming parade on Saturday worked into the early morning hours to create as many armbands and banners as time and materials allowed. As a result of much determination and little sleep, hundreds of armbands were passed out along Saturday's parade route.

(picture of parade)

The parade had its usual number of floats, bands, and elected officials. However, at the end of the parade behind a large yellow banner with three green circles approximately 50 individuals which included students, faculty, staff, deans, vice presidents, members of City Council, and Laramie residents joined the parade lineup. As the marchers passed through the streets of downtown Laramie respectful applause broke out, words of solidarity were heard, individuals were seen crying, and parade spectators joined the group. At the conclusion of the parade the marchers had grown to an estimated 1000. This spontaneous response clearly illustrated that the events being dealt with by Union staff, UW students, and the Laramie community were of a magnitude never before experienced. It was a very moving experience for all involved - those who marched and those who watched.

Other Homecoming events on Saturday illustrated the great impact this tragedy had on the campus community. Along fraternity/sorority mall a large banner was displayed which simply read "UW Greeks will Remember Matthew Shepard". A moment of silence for Matthew was held at the Homecoming football game. The University of Wyoming athletic teams wore a yellow and green symbol supporting ideals of tolerance and diversity.

For members of the Wyoming Union staff, Homecoming Week concluded with a staff meeting Saturday evening, October 10, 1998. The focus of the meeting was to coordinate Union staff efforts to address the crisis across campus and how to best serve students during the unfolding of events over the next week. Programming and media management issues were discussed

along with the need to perform routine job duties even though the office environment was anything but normal.

A key issue of concern addressed at this meeting was the fact that Gay Awareness Week (GAW) was planned for the following week, October 11 - 17, 1998. Briefly, staff questioned whether or not GAW should be rescheduled, but it was quickly realized LGBTQA should make that decision. Jim Osborn shared that LGBTQA decided GAW would occur as planned to show that Matthew Shepard's aggressors were not successful in suppressing an entire community. GAW programs were evaluated in regard to safety issues and necessary modifications were made. Jim Osborn informed Union staff that Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) were on arriving in Laramie to provide assistance with media management.

On Sunday, October 11, 1998, members of the Union staff participated in a five-hour Crisis Intervention Team meeting. UW President Dubois and Wyoming's governor, Jim Geringer, were present for portions of this meeting. Sunday evening, the first candle light vigils were held at local churches.

Remembering Matthew

Monday morning, October 12, 1998, brought news of Matthew's death. By 6 a.m., the President of LGBTQA called the Union Director at home to tell him the sad news. The Union Director contacted CAC staff members to share this news and request they report to the CAC by 7a.m. to provide support and make preparations. Despite previous planning, no one was prepared to deal with the news of Matthew's death or the presence the press had on campus that day. It was easily the most difficult day the Union staff has ever worked.

It is impossible to describe the circumstances that quickly unfolded within a matter of a few hours. While the mood was somber and heart-broken, the Campus Activities Center maintained a high

level of activity. By 9 a.m. the CAC staff, in conjunction with student government and student organizations, developed and promoted a program entitled "Remembering Matthew". The program was intended to allow the campus and Laramie community an opportunity to pause, reflect, and grieve Matthew's death. Throughout the day, hundreds of telephone calls, e-mails and faxes were received expressing sympathy and support, but on occasion some were hate-focused. Students continued to make and distribute armbands. Gay Awareness Week activities began. At dusk, an estimated 1500 people gathered to participate in the "Remember Matthew" program on the main University mall. It was truly a community building experience. Immediately following the ceremony Leslea Ann Newman gave the keynote address for GAW.

(side bar)

Excerpts from the Tuesday, October 13, 1998 Branding Iron (UW student newspaper)

"This tragedy has tested our endurance and our sense of community. But, instead of being torn apart by fear, we have been brought together in unity and in purpose...We must use Matt's example in life to work against hatred, bigotry, and violence...And we must continue to keep Matt Shepard and his family first in our minds and our hearts. Their courage in the face of tragedy should serve to guide us all in the difficult days ahead." - Philip Dubois, UW President

"There is nothing wrong with being angry... If we are not careful to be constructive with our anger, to make good of something bad, than we allow those who are hateful to win...Don't be afraid...Don't be hateful. Don't allow what has been done to close your heart."

- Jesus Rios, ASUW Student Government President

By Monday evening, October 13, 1998, the CAC staff met with student government and approximately 20 student organization leaders to develop a student focused response that became a campus open forum titled "Hostility Bites!". Outside the Union, other University departments were working around the clock as well. The faculty organized a number of teach-ins

which took place in the main University mall. In addition, the University Relations office replied to hundreds of e-mail messages, media questions, and phone calls. An attempt was made to respond to all individuals who contacted the University during this crisis.

Throughout this day several valuable lessons were learned and a fair number of mistakes were made. The idea of doing any work in the Campus Activities Center not directly dealing with the death of Matthew Shepard was not feasible despite any planning or efforts to do so. Staff directly affected by the incident reacted in a variety of ways. Some were very involved, others tried to emotionally distract themselves from the unfolding events, while some tried to keep the day as normal as possible. It also became apparent that experiences of the Campus Activities Center staff were not necessarily those of other Union staff or across campus. CAC staff learned the importance of providing mutual support and communicating with one another. Communication became known as the key to survival. Although regular updates and briefings were held with CAC staff directly involved, in retrospect, communication with all Union staff, tenants, and students should have been maintained. Nearly everyone who worked in the Union felt some connection to the tragedy and could have been more informed as to what was taking place within the building and on the campus.

The remainder of the week entailed working closely with students, staff, faculty, and the Laramie community on a range of issues regarding the University response to Mathew's death. Our learning curve continued to expand. It became apparent that a number of student leaders considered colleagues within CAC had been overlooked and their workspaces taken over for the hectic preparations and meetings since Matthew's death. It was vital to reestablish those relationships and share the workspaces. As people continued to ask questions and request information, we learned the importance of asking our own questions (e.g., Why was something needed? Who was offering assistance? What were the goals of those offering assistance?). A firm understanding of boundaries for Union staff and students who did not wish to be interviewed

were established since film crews from 20/20, Dateline, and MTV and reporters from People Magazine, USA Today, Time, and Newsweek were on campus throughout the week.

Matthew Shepard's funeral occurred on Friday, October 16, 1998 in Casper, Wyoming. Representatives from the University were present to show respect for the life of Matthew Shepard, including UW President Dubois, Vice President of Student Affairs James Hurst and student government executives. With Friday being a "fall break" day many of the Union staff took the day off simply to take care of themselves. The most touching and heart wrenching cards, letters, and items, such as banners signed by thousands of students from other universities across the nation, had begun to arrive and be processed by CAC staff. The past several weeks had taken a toll physical and emotionally.

In an effort to allow the community to communicate their thoughts and feelings to the Shepard family, a book of condolences was placed in the Union for individuals to sign or leave messages to the Shepard family. By the time of the memorial service on October 19, 1998, three books of remarks had been filled. One week after the death of Matthew Shepard, the University of Wyoming held an emotional memorial service with over 1500 in attendance. Those attending wore yellow armbands passed out at the entry by the Vice President of Student Affairs, the Wyoming Union staff, and student volunteers.

Although the memorial provided healing and a level of closure for many members of the community, the impact of Matthew's brutal death is still on the minds of many. With trial dates approaching, the city of Laramie, University of Wyoming, and the Wyoming Union continue to remain focal points of attention for ongoing discussion over bias crime and continued national press attention regarding the death and brutal beating of Matthew Shepard.

What did the Wyoming Union learn?

Reviewing this timeline provides some insight as to what happened and the coping strategies employed with this tragic event. Dealing with a tragedy of this nature is not something one can prepare. The following "Critical Lessons", based on the Wyoming Union's experience, are an attempt to provide some understanding as to how one can anticipate and respond to campus crises.

Critical Lessons

- It is crucial to be prepared to deal with anyone and everything. One must keep an open mind and be able to deal with whatever comes up. Unfortunately, in addition to an outpouring of support, many negativists want to bestow *their* beliefs upon you.
- Communication is the key to survival. Keeping appropriate constituencies apprised of updates, clarifying rumors and any other pertinent issues that may arise is critical.
- Designate individuals to respond to phone calls, emails and letters. These persons should be immediately informed as to how they should respond and who they should respond to by the appointed University liaison. Having a designated point person ensures consistency in information dissemination.
- Have a plan on how you will deal with the media. Again, it is pertinent to have an individual appointed to serve as a spokesperson that will represent your department and organizations well. There are instances when the media will misrepresent what is factual. Filtering information through one individual helps impede inaccurate information. Commit to providing accurate, succinct information.
- Keep students, faculty and staff involved. This means keeping the lines of communication open to all individuals. Respect everyone's feelings and allow time for healing.
- Follow your humanistic instincts. If you are not certain you are able to respond appropriately, ask someone else who can. During crises, there is never enough time to plan your responses and actions. Have confidence in your abilities to meet others' needs.

- Recognize there are circumstances when there is no “right” solution. When every option seems harmful, choose the option that minimizes damage the most.
- Be aware of various students’ needs and attend to them. If you cannot attend to a particular group at a given moment, provide an explanation as to why and set aside time to do so later. Key student groups cannot be ignored during a crisis. They need to keep functioning if they are not involved otherwise.
- Take care of **all** of your staff. It is easy to be caught up in the moment and forget there are others who may be impacted by the crisis but are not necessarily showing it.
- Take care of yourself. In this field, we are trained to respond to the needs of others and sometimes forget to take care of our own needs. You are needed, so take the time to care for yourself so you can be effective to others.
- Trust your staff. They were hired to do the job because they are competent. Allow them to demonstrate their strengths in the time of crisis.
- Remember basic needs. Nobody can function effectively if they have not eaten or slept.
- It is ok to bend the rules in times of crises. There are times when certain policies that hinder a process may need to be overlooked. Allow for flexibility.
- Maintain a sense of humor.

What did this tragedy reaffirm for the Wyoming Union staff?

- UW’s President Dubois’ visibility, honest emotion, and sense of compassion provided a clear role model for the campus and local community.
- It is critical to develop and maintain relationships with your campus’ student leaders and student organizations.
- Although crisis management teams are utilized infrequently, it is critical that colleges and universities have such teams so that mobilization can occur immediately when necessary.
- The Union staff values the UW Safe Zone Program. Safe Zone was established in 1996 by the CAC to promote a more positive campus climate for gays, lesbians, bisexuals,

transgender, and questioning individuals. Establishment of this program had previously solidified the necessary relationships to deal with this particular crisis.

- The purpose, value and strength of the Wyoming Union were reaffirmed.

Nothing can fully prepare one for tragic events, nor can we prevent such acts. However, we can try to prepare ourselves for whatever fallout occurs. It is reassuring to have a plan in place to allow students, faculty and staff to perform optimally. However, as the Wyoming Union discovered one can never be prepared to deal with the overwhelming thoughts and emotions that accompany such a tragedy.