



Shepard, Matthew (1976-1998)

by Nikolai Endres

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Matthew Shepard.
Video still from this
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Matthew Shepard led an unremarkable yet interesting life, but it was his shocking death that transformed him into an icon of the glbtq movement for equality.

Shepard was born in Casper, Wyoming, on December 1, 1976, the oldest son of Dennis and Judy Peck Shepard. He attended high school in Switzerland, spoke several languages, extolled human rights, and envisioned a career in diplomacy and world affairs. He briefly attended Catawba College in North Carolina and Casper College in Wyoming, where he performed in several plays, and then lived in Denver, where he held several jobs.

In 1998, he enrolled as an "out" student at the University of Wyoming, where he majored in political science, international relations, and foreign languages. He soon joined the campus gay alliance.

Small and frail in stature, beautiful and boyish in looks, he was a kind and gentle spirit. He had recently learned that he was HIV-positive. Polite and friendly, he was generally unthreatening--except for his sexual orientation.

On the night of October 6, 1998, near Gay Awareness Week, Shepard was lured from the Fireside Bar, a gay-friendly hangout in downtown Laramie, by two men, Aaron McKinney, 22, and Russell Henderson, 21, who pretended to be gay.

After Shepard agreed to leave with them and got into their pickup truck, McKinney and Henderson drove to the other side of town, beat him with the butt of a .357 magnum pistol, stole his wallet (including his credit card, which provided a first clue to the police) and his shoes (so that he could not walk back), and tied him to a fence.

Hours later, the two men got into a fight with two Hispanics and used the still bloody gun to club them. Meanwhile, Shepard, immobilized and with the temperature dropping to below freezing, soon became comatose.

About eighteen hours later, a mountain biker found the brutalized young man. At first glance, he thought what he saw was a scarecrow.

Shepard was rushed to a hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado, and put on full life support, but in the early hours of October 12, without regaining consciousness, he expired, with his parents, who had been summoned from their home in Denver, by his side.

Medically, his death resulted from severe trauma to the brain stem, massive head fractures, and hypothermia. He was so badly injured that doctors were unable to perform surgery.

The scarecrow image, a vivid reminder of homosexuals as outcasts, coupled with the Biblical symbol of a

crucifixion, caused an outcry across the world. Shepard made the cover of *Time* magazine and the front page of *The New York Times*; thousands of candlelight vigils were held across the nation. Within weeks, Shepard's parents had received 10,000 letters and 70,000 e-mails. The glbtq community, both outraged and frightened, grieved deeply.

Perhaps the most enduring detail of the image of the young man chained to the fence was his disfigured face--humanized by the small rivulets of tears from his eyes that had washed away the blood, an image evoked in countless poems, paintings, and portraits.

To understand the tragedy, attention focused on Laramie, supposedly Wyoming's most "liberal" town. Yet its liberality seemed not to extend to embracing the glbtq community. Years before, a local billboard had been altered from "Shoot a day or two" to "Shoot a gay or two." Confronted by the press, Laramie's inhabitants objected to the stereotype of them as bigoted cowboys, intolerant homophobes, and raging simpletons. They echoed the sentiment "it could happen anywhere."

But perhaps part of the problem with Laramie was its very refusal to acknowledge responsibility. Churches were filled with "hate the sin, love the sinner" slogans; and politicians eagerly proclaimed their mantra that "all crimes are hate crimes." Nobody, it seems, was willing to take an unequivocal stand for the rights of glbtq people.

Problematically, too, hate-monger Reverend Fred Phelps from Topeka, Kansas, author of the website GodHatesFags.com, attended Shepard's funeral to proclaim "No Tears for Queers" and "Matt in Hell." But the mourners, in heavy snow, shielded the grieving family with their umbrellas and sang "Amazing Grace."

Justice was served swiftly, but under an intense media scrutiny that at times imperiled a fair trial for the defendants. Henderson, to avoid the death penalty, struck a plea bargain and was sentenced to life imprisonment.

At McKinney's murder trial, Phelps was back, but once again counter-protesters, dressed as white "angels" with enormous wings, rendered his hatred void.

McKinney's lawyers desperately tried to advance the "gay panic defense," but the judge dismissed these attempts, ruling that such a defense is not recognized by Wyoming law.

For McKinney, the jury returned a verdict of guilty on two counts of felony murder (he was acquitted of first-degree murder). At the request of Shepard's parents, he was spared capital punishment and received two consecutive life sentences, without the possibility of appeal or parole, plus a lifelong gag order about the crime.

In asking the court to spare his son's murderer, Dennis Shepard, Matthew's father, remarked, "My son Matthew paid a terrible price to open the eyes of all of us who live in Wyoming, the United States, and the world to the unjust and unnecessary fears, discrimination, and intolerance that members of the gay community face every day."

He addressed McKinney directly, telling him, "My son died because of your ignorance and intolerance . . . I give you life in the memory of one who no longer lives. May you have a long life, and may you thank Matthew every day for it."

In many ways, Shepard's death was all too familiar, perhaps a little more cruel and bloody than the usual fatal gaybashing, but not different in kind from many others. Yet his death struck a deep chord in the glbtq community and throughout the country (indeed, the world), probably because of his youth, his good looks, and his vulnerability.

Consequently, Shepard became an icon of the glbtq movement for equality, a symbol, as his father phrased it, "against hate . . . a symbol for encouraging respect for individuality; for appreciating that someone is different; for tolerance."

Most immediately, he became the poster boy for hate crimes legislation. Such laws were adopted in several jurisdictions, but failed to pass in many states and stalled on the federal level. Although Wyoming refused to adopt a statewide hate crimes law, a local ordinance did pass in Laramie.

Shepard's parents have since become vocal activists for glbtq rights. His mother Judy Shepard maintains a heavy speaking schedule and lobbies in support of hate crimes legislation and services for homeless gay and lesbian youth.

In 1999, the Shepards established the Matthew Shepard Foundation (www.matthewshepard.org). They also maintain a personal tribute, Matthew's Place (www.matthewsplace.com), with many links to online resources, such as the Human Rights Campaign; the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation; Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays; the Matthew Shepard Memorial Quilt; and advice for parents, friends, and families with glbtq children and relatives. The site also preserves Dennis Shepard's statements to the court at the conclusion of the McKinney trial.

Shepard has become a fixture of popular culture, evoked by celebrities and performers in order to signal their position on hate crimes and gay bashings. Ellen DeGeneres and Barbara Streisand attended a Matthew Shepard rally on Capitol Hill just days after the incident; inspired by Shepard's death, Melissa Etheridge wrote "Scarecrow" on her album *Breakdown* and dedicated it to Shepard's memory; Elton John presented a concert in Laramie and played "Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me" especially for the slain young man; Peter, Paul, and Mary also performed in Wyoming at a concert in Shepard's memory.

In 2000, Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project performed the play *The Laramie Project* in Laramie and then across the country; made into an HBO motion picture in 2002, it has since become a staple of university and community theater. In 2002, NBC broadcast a made-for-television movie, *The Matthew Shepard Story*, starring Stockard Channing and Sam Waterston.

In academia, Shepard has been honored as well. Every year, thanks to the First Friday Breakfast Club, the Lambda Beta Nu Breakfast Club (gay and lesbian associations respectively), and the Rich Eychaner Charitable Foundation, three openly gay and lesbian Iowa high school seniors are eligible for free tuition at Iowa's public universities. At Weber State University, "18 concerned individuals," mostly from Salt Lake City, Ogden, and Northern Utah, set up a Matthew Shepard scholarship to "promote awareness." Monmouth University has a fund, supported through the royalties from the book *From Hate Crimes to Human Rights: A Tribute to Matthew Shepard* (2001), for students who plan to work for "human rights advocacy."

In recent years, as more and more pressure mounted to pass federal hate crimes legislation, Shepard has been the victim of defamation by right-wing politicians and conservative religious figures.

For example, in the House of Representatives in 2009, Republican Representative Virginia Fox, in a speech characterized by Keith Olbermann as "the most despicable thing said on the floor of the House in decades," declared that Shepard was not killed because he was gay and that the story of his death is "really a hoax that continues to be used as an excuse for passing these [hate crime] bills."

Despite the efforts to discredit Shepard, hate crimes legislation finally passed Congress and was signed into law by President Obama on October 28, 2009, eight years after first being introduced. The bill is named the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act.

The hate crimes bill was the first federal legislation that specifically recognized the civil rights of glbtq people. Fittingly, the parents of Shepard were invited to the signing ceremony.

Upon the passage of the bill, Judy Shepard issued the following statement: "When Dennis and I started calling 10 years ago for federal action to prevent and properly prosecute hate crimes against gay, lesbian and transgendered Americans, we never imagined it would take this long. The legislation went through so many versions and so many votes that we had to constantly keep our hopes in check to keep from getting discouraged. . . . We are incredibly grateful to Congress and the president for taking this step forward on behalf of hate crime victims and their families, especially given the continuing attacks on people simply for living their lives openly and honestly."

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About the Author

Nikolai Endres received his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 2000. As an associate professor at Western Kentucky University, he teaches Great Books, British literature, classics, mythology, and gay and lesbian studies. He has published on Plato, Petronius, Gustave Flaubert, Oscar Wilde, E. M. Forster, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mary Renault, Gore Vidal, Patricia Nell Warren, and others. His next project is a "queer" reading of the myth and music of Richard Wagner. He is also working on a book-length study of Platonic love as a homoerotic code in the modern gay novel.