

By James C. Hurst



The Matthew Shepard Tragedy

Management of a Crisis

How the students and faculty of the University of Wyoming responded to the unfathomable—the brutal and hateful murder of one of their own.

IT WAS JUST A LITTLE BEFORE 8:00 P.M. on Tuesday evening, October 6, 1998, when the University of Wyoming Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered Association (LGBTGA) registered student organization concluded its meeting in the Wyoming Union. Plans were being completed for Gay Awareness Week, October 12 to 16. After a cup of coffee with his friends at a local restaurant, Matthew Shepard said goodnight and went to the Fireside Bar in Laramie on his way home. There he met Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, who during their conversation led him to believe they were gay. Matthew later left the bar with McKinney and Henderson, was taken to a location several miles east of Laramie, and was robbed, severely beaten, tied to a buck fence, and left in sub-freezing temperatures.

On Wednesday, October 7, at about 6:00 P.M., a UW student out for a mountain bike ride discovered Matthew and summoned police to the scene. Matthew was taken immediately to Iverson Memorial Hospital in Laramie, but because of the severity of his injuries, he was immediately transferred to the hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado, sixty miles south of Laramie.

About 10:00 P.M. that same night, I received a call at my home from Father Roger Schmit, pastor of the Newman Center, reporting that he had learned of the discovery of a badly beaten young man east of Laramie. He did not know whether the individual was a student but thought I should be informed. Father Schmit has

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worked closely with the Division of Student Affairs in a number of other crises and is a member of the university's Crisis Intervention Team. I immediately contacted the university police for information and was told that they were well informed about the incident and that the victim was not a student registered at the University of Wyoming. I called Father Schmit back to tell him that what he had heard was accurate and that the victim, not a student, had been transported to the Poudre Valley Hospital in Fort Collins.

On Thursday, October 8, the director of the Wyoming Union called to tell me that the victim was a student and was probably mortally injured. Only with the university president's intervention were we able to get an incident report from the Laramie Police Department. It confirmed that the victim's name was Matthew Shepard and that he was indeed enrolled at the University of Wyoming. Matthew's parents were in Saudi Arabia, where Matthew's father was employed in the oil industry. They had been informed and were arranging to fly to be with their son. The police reported that the crime appeared to be motivated by robbery, but they also observed that the victim was gay and that hate and bias might have been motivating factors as well. The news quickly spread throughout the university and the community, and calls from local, regional, and national networks and news services began to flood the area. Upon learning that Matthew was a student, I immediately made arrangements to convene the university Crisis Intervention Team at 4:00 P.M. that same day.

THE CRISIS INTERVENTION TEAM

THE UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING Crisis Intervention Team has demonstrated its usefulness repeatedly over the years in a variety of circumstances having an impact on the entire campus community and the community of Laramie. The team is chaired by the vice president for student affairs and, according to the nature of the crisis, may include representatives from Housing and Residence Life, Student Life, the Uni-

versity of Wyoming Police Department, the United Campus Ministry, Intercollegiate Athletics, the University Counseling Center, University Relations, and a faculty member and dean reflecting the academic affiliation of the student or students involved. Given the nature of the Matthew Shepard tragedy, we added to the team the city manager, the mayor, the chief of the Laramie Police Department, the vice president for academic affairs, the president and adviser of the LGBTQA registered student organization, Matthew's academic adviser, the pastor of Canterbury House (an organization of the Episcopalian Church, the Shepards' religious affiliation), the director of the Wyoming Union and members of the Student Activities Council, the president and vice president of the Associated Students of the University of Wyoming (ASUW), and the chair of the faculty senate. The president of the university also joined the team for most of the meetings.

The Crisis Intervention Team had its initial meeting that Thursday afternoon and met again on Friday morning, on Sunday from 11 A.M. to 4 P.M., and on every morning at 8:00 A.M. during the week of October 12 to 16. Topics addressed by the team included

- management of the media that had descended on campus
- communications within the academic and Laramie communities, including rumor control
- coordination of vigils and, after Monday, October 12, memorials for Matthew
- appropriate use of already planned homecoming events to acknowledge the tragedy
- involvement of students and the student association in the management of the crisis
- role of faculty in classroom conversation and university-wide faculty teach-ins
- interactions with the Shepard family

- Gay Awareness Week activities
- national and international requests for information, requests for involvement, and, in some instances, threats
- coordination of efforts to learn essential lessons from the tragedy
- involvement of the Laramie community in events and interventions
- initial planning for a memorial event for the campus and community on Monday, October 19
- acknowledgment of the grief and the desire for involvement throughout the university and the community of Laramie

WYOMING UNION, LGBTQA, AND STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

THE DIRECTOR of the Wyoming Union and the student activities staff turned over their main offices and phones to the LGBTQA leadership and members to provide them with resources and enable them to better provide assistance to the university and community in dealing with the tragedy. It was concluded early on that central involvement of LGBTQA members not only would help them deal with their concern but would be good for the university. The Student Activities Center became a focus of intense media attention, which lasted from October 9 to the final campus memorial service on October 19. During the week, every major TV network and dozens of newspaper and radio stations were present on campus from early morning until late at night looking for stories to write and broadcast.

On Friday afternoon, October 9, a joint press conference was held on the steps of the city and county building, focusing on the president of the university, the president and adviser of the LGBTQA, the president of the AAUW, and the Albany County sheriff. At that press conference the sheriff reported that two suspects were in custody along with two individuals charged with being accessories after the fact.

Friday evening a major university homecoming activity—a traditional *sing*, involving fraternities, sororities, and other registered student organizations in a competitive musical performance—proceeded as planned. During the evening the student in charge of

the event offered some remarks regarding the tragedy and observed several minutes of silence. It was a powerful and appropriate acknowledgment.

Also on that Friday, yellow armbands with green circles began to appear—tied around arms and attached to backpacks, to items of clothing, to light posts and flagpoles. The armbands were the result of work by the members of the AAUW, the United Multicultural Council, and a variety of registered student organizations, who convened in the Multicultural Resource Center of the Wyoming Union to produce them. The symbolism became one of the most powerful and unifying forces of the entire tragedy. The yellow of the armbands recalled previous national tragedies—the hostage crisis and the Oklahoma City bombing. The green circles echoed the international sign for peace. Student groups, of their own volition, went to local stores to purchase the material and then spent considerable time cutting out and constructing the armbands, often working through the night. When workers at Wal-Mart and K Mart stores discovered what students were buying the material for, they refused payment and insisted on assisting in the effort by cutting the material to the appropriate size. This is but one example of touching and supportive community involvement. The armbands were distributed to students as they passed through the Wyoming Union, at vigils in the residence halls, and at other high-traffic locations across campus.

At the Crisis Intervention Team meeting Friday morning, the representative from Intercollegiate Athletics indicated that he would approach the football team and the women's volleyball team, who were both playing on Saturday, October 10, to assess team members' interest in wearing what was becoming the unifying symbol for nonviolence—the yellow bands with green circles. Members of both teams chose immediately and unanimously to display the symbols prominently on their uniforms. It was entirely a student athlete gesture. Under the president's direction, the football game was preceded by words acknowledging the tragedy that had occurred and a period of silence, with Matthew's photograph displayed on the scoreboard. The moment was a powerful reminder and opportunity for participation for all attending the homecoming athletic events. It was also on Saturday that the Greek community held a display on the fraternity-sorority mall, with the yellow and green armband theme and the notation "Remembering Matthew," as evidence of concern for and involvement in the tragedy.

Saturday morning, October 10, the traditional homecoming parade occurred as usual, but a number of

floats added last-minute tributes to Matthew. The MEChA float, for instance, read “Teach Tolerance.” Students, faculty, staff, and community members made the event unique and memorable by gathering to march at the end of the parade behind a yellow banner with green circles sponsored by the AAUW and the United Multicultural Council. This turned out to be an emotional and powerful experience. As the group marched along the street, spectators offered respectful applause and many wept openly. Individuals along the parade route were invited to join the group’s march, and the group had grown to approximately one thousand by the time the parade ended. Marchers included deans, department heads, vice presidents, the mayor, members of the city council, and campus and community members. Students had taken the leadership in planning this event. Marchers wore the yellow and green armbands and passed them out liberally to others along the parade route.

Following the homecoming parade I traveled to Poudre Valley Hospital to meet with Dennis and Judy Shepard, who had by that time arrived in Fort Collins and were staying in quarters provided by Poudre Valley Hospital. Matthew’s brother, who lives in Minnesota, had also arrived. The Shepards had determined that they would not make any individual appearances or have meetings with anyone at that time, so I met with the public relations persons provided by Poudre Valley Hospital, and we extended to the Shepards a written message expressing the university’s and the Laramie community’s grief over what had occurred and an offer to provide assistance with lodging, food, or whatever else might be appropriate. The Shepard family at a later time acknowledged our message and apologized for not being available but asked for understanding of what they were going through at that time. Throughout the entire ordeal the Shepards were magnificent in their sensitivity, compassion, and understanding of all that had occurred.

PREPARATION AND COORDINATION

ON SUNDAY, October 11, the expanded Crisis Intervention Team met from 11:00 A.M. until 4:00 P.M., making plans and coordinating activities among students, staff, faculty, and the community for dealing with the tragedy. It was acknowledged that one of the greatest challenges was providing cooperation with and support for the media that seemed to be present everywhere on the campus. On Sunday evening the first major outdoor vigil was held at the Newman Center, located across from the campus. The president and his family, members of the LGBTA who were Matthew’s friends, Matthew’s pastor, and others spoke, and students from the center provided appropriate music. This vigil was organized by Father Schmit.

Monday morning, October 12, we all awakened to the news that Matthew had died overnight. The mood across campus was somber; all members of the campus community seemed to feel keenly the implications of Matthew’s death. The Campus Activities Center sponsored a remembrance ceremony on Monday evening near the flagpole on Prexy’s Pasture, the main university mall. The ceremony turned out to be one of the major events, with over one thousand people estimated to be present. The mood of the ceremony was different from that of previous events because Matthew had now died, and we had to acknowledge that a hate crime had resulted in the death of one of our University of Wyoming students. Monday was also the first day of Gay Awareness Week. The LGBTA had decided to carry on the week’s events as planned, with the added incentive of using them to recognize the tragedy that had occurred and emphasize nonviolence and opposition to hate. Following the remembrance ceremony the LGBTA proceeded with its program in the arts and sciences auditorium with guest speaker Leslea Newman, author of *Heather Has Two Mommies*.

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On Tuesday, October 13, the academic dean's council meeting was devoted to organizing in- and out-of-class faculty teach-ins. It was arranged that those social sciences faculty who were willing would be available to meet with classes taught by faculty from the hard sciences, who appeared to be less comfortable dealing with an issue of this nature in their classes. Teach-ins on Prexy's Pasture were planned and occurred during the noon hour daily for the rest of the week. On Wednesday evening, October 14, a campuswide program, Hostility Bites, was sponsored by the AAUW to give students, faculty, and staff opportunities to interact with a panel in a discussion of the Matthew Shepard tragedy and the destructiveness of hate.

Friday, October 16, was the beginning of fall break. Many students went home for the long weekend. Coincidentally, the Laramie community had preplanned a three-day event entitled Laramie Beyond 2000, a community-campus endeavor to do some long-range strategic planning and goal setting for both the city and the university. The Matthew Shepard tragedy colored all that was discussed and planned during those sessions.

On Friday, October 16, funeral services were held for Matthew in St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral in Casper, Wyoming, the home of the Shepard family. The president invited me, the LGBTA officers and adviser, and the AAUW officers to accompany him to Casper on his plane. On Monday evening, October 19, the final university and community memorial service took place on the university campus in the arts and sciences auditorium. The planning committee for this service had been appointed the previous week. Speakers included the president of the university, a friend of Matthew's from the LGBTA, and a second friend who was also a local poet. Music was provided by a recognized student gospel choir. By the time this final memorial service was held, much of the media attention had dissipated, and the intensity that came with the scrutiny of the nation seemed to be passing. To the present day, how-

ever, the yellow and green armbands are still seen on backpacks and on poles and trees on campus and in the Laramie community. Though they are faded now, they continue to remind us of all that transpired and, more important, of the need to rededicate and recommit ourselves to nonviolence and opposition to hate and to acceptance of and celebration of the differences that exist among us.

POSTCRISIS CRITIQUE

ON FRIDAY, November 6, the Crisis Intervention Team met for the purpose of critiquing its campus leadership during the crisis. Such postcrisis critiques are held with the intent of helping the Crisis Intervention Team operate in an increasingly effective manner. Here are the elements of the university response that the team identified as particularly helpful or otherwise noteworthy:

Involvement of the University of Wyoming President. The president's high visibility and intense personal involvement with the work of the Crisis Intervention Team and in the vigils and memorials was crucial. His unequivocal anti-hate, anti-violence stance and acceptance of differences among individuals was a powerful factor in establishing a sense of leadership for the institution in this crisis.

Work of the Crisis Intervention Team. The team provided a critical planning and coordinating locus for involving all the appropriate constituencies. Its expansion to include members of the community and a broad array of students, faculty, and staff from campus was essential to making it effective throughout this crisis.

Flexibility and Responsiveness of the Wyoming Union and Student Activities Staff. In the face of numerous challenges, these staff members turned over offices and resources to the LGBTA membership, and it was in their offices that the media focus

converged during the ten days immediately following the attack on Matthew. Professional staff and some student assistants were commonly working eighteen-hour days to assist with all that was transpiring.

Involvement of the LGBTA. No other group could have played a more powerful role in helping the nation understand that the university and the Laramie community are not filled with anti-gay malice and hostility. Laramie and the university, like any communities of comparable size, have problems and challenges, but they are not, as some have depicted, hotbeds of redneck violence and hatred. The leaders and members of the LGBTA offered the most powerful voices of accuracy and reason.

Involvement of Other Student Organizations. Organizations such as the AAUW, the United Multicultural Council, the Multicultural Resource Center, the Greek community, and the residence hall association provided leadership that was remarkably effective in helping the university and community deal with a tragedy that touched everyone's lives.

Management of the Media Presence by University Relations. Most behaved ethically, but there were instances of media representatives intentionally seeking out those willing to offer sensational statements and developing a story around these statements. The issues in dealing with the media in a circumstance like this are extensive enough to be worthy of a separate article. Suffice it to say that centralized coordination for communicating across campus and with national media is essential if a consistent, accurate, and complete picture is to be presented.

Provision of Discussion Forums by Faculty. The faculty teach-ins were scholarly but sensitive in their approach. Also, a survey showed that about half of the students had classes in which faculty members set the class subject matter aside for at least one day to discuss the Matthew Shepard tragedy and what it meant to the community and the nation. Very few of these professors, however, were in the hard sciences, and

it appeared that the social sciences faculty felt more comfortable dealing with the topic.

Work of the University Counseling Center. We noted that even though the university made certain that counseling center resources were available, fewer students than we had anticipated requested help with personal difficulties arising from the tragedy. We considered that perhaps students are more resilient in the face of this kind of crisis than we often assume.

Planning for the University-Wide Memorial Service. Planning was done by a Crisis Intervention Team committee carefully selected to ensure proper representation of the various constituencies desiring involvement in the memorial service.

Involvement of the Newman Center, Canterbury House, and United Campus Ministry. These three organizations proved extremely helpful at various points; in particular, Canterbury House turned out to be an excellent clearinghouse for communication between the university and the Shepard family.

Communication with the Shepard Family. We considered it important to take great care that university activities and plans were consistent with what Matthew's family would desire and in no case would conflict with their concerns and desires.

Efforts of the University of Wyoming Police Department. The service of the university police (UWPD) was critical in the face of the numerous threats the university received from both anti-gay establishments and gay activist organizations from across the country. In one incident the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, sent a delegation of hatemongers to the funeral service in Casper. Signs reading, "God Hates Fags," "Matthew is in Hell," and "AIDS Cures Fags" were displayed by a group of protesters across the street from St. Mark's Cathedral. Their threats that they would be on campus to protest the final Monday night memorial service were meticulously prepared for. However, they never arrived at that service. UWPD also took

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great care in ensuring safety and protection for all LGBTA members and officers during Gay Awareness Week. These extra measures provided a sense of security that was welcome.

MARCH 1999

ALMOST FIVE MONTHS have now passed since Matthew's life was so brutally extinguished. Healing continues to make its way through the university community and the city of Laramie. Although the yellow ribbons with green circles that we still see among us have faded, the spirit of resolve is brighter than ever in the hearts of those who permitted themselves to be touched by this tragic but powerful event. A renewed interest in prejudice reduction training and an open commitment to protecting and preserving the rights of

those who are different from the majority is evidence that the landscape in this small corner of America has changed for the better. A few days ago, in preparation for a presentation about the management of the crisis surrounding the Matthew Shepard tragedy, I previewed a videotape of scenes from the events of October 6 to 16. At the conclusion of the eight-minute video the room was particularly quiet. My own eyes and cheeks were bathed with tears of renewed grief—and I was not alone. We all once again wept openly. And that is exactly as it should be. This was not an incident to be forgotten or shifted to an unused corner of our memories. This was something to be kept alive in both our memories and our hearts along with the shared resolve to do everything in our power to stand with courage and strength in a brotherhood and sisterhood that protects and nourishes us all.



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