

# I've Completely Changed:

## The Transforming Impact of the Matthew Shepard Scholarship

Nicholas J. Pace

*University of Northern Iowa*

Of all the topics within education, issues surrounding gay and lesbian students may be the least commonly researched and chronicled. Despite the fact that gay and lesbian characters are increasingly present in the media, the cultural debate about gay rights burns hotter than ever. Research into the experiences of gay and lesbian youth is very limited, especially when compared to other topics in education (Harris & Bliss, 1997; Kielwasser & Wolf, 1994; O'Connor, 1995; Rofes, 1995). Although some form of sex education is almost universal in school curricula, information on sexual orientation is typically considered out of bounds.

The near-toxic environment often faced by gay and lesbian students also discourages many from disclosing their sexual orientation. Unks (2003) called high schools "the most homophobic institutions in American society" (p. 323). Therefore, it is not surprising that the lives of gay and lesbian high school students are so seldom studied. Their reluctance to identify themselves is understandable and has presented practical challenges for researchers.

When gay and lesbian students do get consideration in the literature, a bleak and disturbing picture typically takes shape. The small body of research often reveals a host of problems and

This article describes the impact of receiving the Matthew Shepard Scholarship (a 4-year, full scholarship) on 8 students who were openly gay or lesbian in high school. Previous literature, while limited, paints a decidedly bleak picture of the prospects for gay and lesbian youth. However, this previous research is often based on students in therapy or otherwise exhibiting maladjustment and ignores those youth who are successful. Through a narrative structure, the 8 students described their experiences with harassment, fear, social isolation, and other difficulties before overcoming these challenges and being selected as a Matthew Shepard Scholar. In addition to the experience of coming out, receiving this award represented a further point of transformation in their lives. The honor and recognition of receiving the scholarship further magnified their confidence, aspirations, and educational opportunities. Educators often fail to recognize the talents and promise of gay and lesbian students. The narratives of these students serve to highlight the achievements, as well as the struggles, of gay and lesbian youth in our nation's high schools. The students' accounts of the scholarship suggest that educators and researchers should not be derailed by debates about sexual orientation, but rather, they should focus on their obligation to develop the potential of all students. In particular, educators should establish safe and nurturing educational environments by addressing harassment issues and establishing awareness workshops for faculty and staff. Through these efforts, the talents of students can be developed and their promise realized.

## Summary

dangers associated with being a sexual minority in school. These negatives include how sexual orientation issues are, if addressed at all, almost always handled in a negative light. This is often because educators are unprepared or unwilling to do otherwise (Fontaine, 1997; Sears, 1988, 1992; Telljohann & Price, 1993). Some other common themes include social isolation (Blumenfeld, 1995; Elia, 1993), verbal and physical harassment (Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2003; Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2001), low self-esteem and internalized homophobia (Gonisorek & Rudolf, 1991; Herek, 1984), poor school performance (Jordan, Vaughan & Woodworth, 1997), and suicidal ideation (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2003; Owens, 1998). Other reports detail substance abuse (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Remafedi, 1990) and unwanted pregnancies, disease, and prostitution (Pederson, 1994; Russell, 1989).

Recently, however, a handful of scholars have begun to question this problem-centered view, arguing that there are major flaws in much of the research and conclusions. Kielwasser and Wolf (1994) noted that many of these conclusions have come from nonrepresentative samples of students who were already involved in counseling and therapy programs. Others, such as Raissiguier (1997), concluded that the overemphasis on the problems of gay and lesbian youth actually obscures "the fact that most [gay and lesbian] teenagers [like most straight ones] suffer through but survive adolescence" (p. 35).

In addition, this problem-centered view does a disservice to gay and lesbian youth by failing to adequately consider the strengths and potential these young people have. The negative focus ignores research that concludes that most gay and lesbian youth appear to be socially well adjusted and psychologically healthy (Savin-Williams, 1990). Miceli (2002) echoed this conclusion, arguing that much of the research is

. . . giving the impression that homosexuality invariably leads to suffering and unhappiness. . . . What such a perspective misses is an understanding of GLB youth who have successfully avoided such negative experiences and

outcomes, and the variables that contributed to such success. (p. 203)

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory study was to examine the impact of receiving the Matthew Shepard Scholarship (a 4-year, full scholarship) on 8 students who were openly gay or lesbian in high school. With this context in place, we now shift attention to understanding the origins and impetus of the Matthew Shepard Scholarship.

## The Matthew Shepard Scholarship

The Matthew Shepard Scholarship began in 2000 following the antigay murder of University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard in 1998. The privately funded scholarship covers books, tuition, and fees for up to 4 years at an Iowa Regent's University and is awarded with the blessing of the Shepard family, although they are not directly involved with the scholarship. The scholarship, which is awarded annually to openly gay or lesbian graduates of Iowa high schools, is based on academic aptitude, academic achievement, community service, and financial need. Typically, between three and seven full scholarships are awarded each year, along with honorary awards of \$500. If the scholarship committee identifies more than three deserving applicants, it may award more than three full scholarships. The scholarship has steadily grown over the past 8 years and is underwritten by a private charitable foundation, in association with Iowa Pride Network, and a regional community center for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) persons.

The scholarship's roots can be traced to the experiences and generosity of the scholarship's founder, Rich Eychaner. Growing up in a Midwestern college town, Rich recounted his family's struggles through the Depression, as well as their steadfast belief in the value and merits of a quality education. His father dropped out of college due to financial difficulties and never returned. His

mother, who was a teacher and school board member for many years, helped solidify the value of education in Rich's mind.

Influenced by these lessons, Rich later developed a generous tuition and fees scholarship for local high school students. That award sought to honor the lessons taught by Rich's parents and provide educational opportunity for local high school students, based on minority status, race, national origin, ethnicity, physical challenge, or sexual orientation. These application criteria were combined with academic aptitude, academic achievement, community service, and financial need. After 10 years, however, no one had applied under the sexual orientation provision. At about the same time, Matthew Shepard was murdered in Wyoming.

That event crystallized the need for a new scholarship. Rich explained that ". . . this was a transforming experience for the country and for an awful lot of gay and lesbian people, as well as nongay and lesbian people around the country." He saw an opportunity to begin building the type of network that was missing in the earlier scholarship. "I wanted to build networks with the kids, so that they didn't operate as isolated ships in the nights . . . we've built convoys . . ." (personal interview, August 19, 2004).

Rich established the Matthew Shepard Scholarship in Iowa, hoping it could promote an open public discussion about the oft-avoided topic of sexual orientation, young people, and education. Rich also sought "to do something that transformed the state . . . to talk about gay rights and issues in the state" (personal interview, August 19, 2004). To that end, one of the requirements of the scholarship is that it is presented publicly at the school's awards program or graduation ceremony. Rich said most scholars, families, and schools have welcomed the award presentation and subsequent discussion, although that open reception is not universal. Some parents and school officials have been lukewarm or resistant to the public presentation of the scholarship.

Well, that's not the deal. The deal is we come and present it in your high school because it's not just about educating the kids, it's about educating the communities . . . letting them know they have kids in the community who

happen to be gay and lesbian, and they should be proud of it. Recognize these great kids. (personal interview, August 19, 2004)

To further the dialogue and acknowledgement of gay and lesbian students, Rich reported the scholarship committee had begun calling attention to the issue and scholarship by interacting with state legislators, some of whom were less than enthusiastic.

So, we're starting to hand out brochures to every legislator, every year, sometimes twice . . . saying, "Oh, the deadline's coming up, distinguished gay and lesbian students in your district, make sure they apply." And so, every way we can think of, we're just trying to get that message out there for these [kids in the state]. (personal interview, August 19, 2004)

Rich understood that some people's uncomfortable reaction to the Matthew Shepard Scholarship came from their perception that the award was a reward for being gay or lesbian. This view, he explained, misses the point.

The whole thing is designed to be educational . . . not make gays and lesbians feel it's something they should be ashamed of, but make it something they should be proud of. And, in my mind, achievement is being out, being successful in college, setting records, in spite of whatever extra burdens are out there for being a lesbian in high school. It's not to reward kids for their sexual orientation; it's a reward for how they've *handled* their sexual orientation. (personal interview, August 19, 2004)

He explained the emancipatory goals of the award,

I wanted to reach kids and give them some hope. . . . But, I also wanted to recognize the kids that were out. I also wanted to say to those who don't like it in the closet that

aren't proud and don't feel safe to come out until they get to college or a little bit later, or an awful lot later. I wanted to say, you know, "If you had the courage to come out . . . it would help you, it would make life a lot easier." (personal interview, August 19, 2004)

In addition to fostering open discussion and providing educational opportunities for deserving students, the scholarship seeks to broaden people's horizons of what a gay or lesbian person can be. As a result, Matthew Shepard Scholars and their families are invited to a formal awards ceremony in the capital city. These experiences are designed to provide powerful images of the possibilities that are open to students with the help of the scholarship. Many of these opportunities appear in stark contrast to the images of gay and lesbians that many students and their families are most accustomed. Rich described the impact on parents and students alike.

[So, we] brought the kids out of their hometown . . . these kids are nervous, they are in the Des Moines Club with a beautiful nighttime view of the state capital, they're amidst all these adults . . . you get all these stereotype images in their heads . . . they're surprised . . . people say, "Oh yeah, I could see my kid be somebody like this, here's a doctor, here's a lawyer, here's a you know, totally respectable adult." And, the parents get images they can take home and work on. (personal interview, August 19, 2004)

Rich said the experience in the capital often causes a dramatic shift in attitude among parents, helping to move them toward acceptance and understanding. Some parents who were, at best, reluctant participants, leave changed. Rich related,

. . . I remember a dad who didn't want to come to the dinner . . . and then we're leaving and he said, "I don't remember what I had for dinner last night, I don't remember

what I did 2 days ago, but I'll remember tonight for the rest of my life." (personal interview, August 19, 2004)

The scholarship also provides a 2-day college prep seminar. The seminar seeks to assist the recipients with transition into college. Scholarship officials address a variety of topics, from strategies for academic success to leaving home for the first time. Rich said planners seek to make the seminars relevant for the many new challenges college freshmen experience, especially those from small communities. Different presenters emphasize the importance of establishing relationships with professors and utilizing office hours, as well as guarding against exploitation and danger in a new setting.

To publicize the scholarship and application process, brochures are mailed to every high school guidance counselor, principal, high school newspaper editor, school journalism advisor, and newspaper in the state. Rich acknowledged that not all guidance counselors actually pass the information on to students; instead, some choose to throw the information away.

This is not surprising according to some research. Harris and Bliss (1997), Sears (1992), and Telljohann and Price (1993) conducted research on guidance counselors' interaction with gay and lesbian students. Much of this research supports Rich's firsthand experience that many Matthew Shepard Scholarship brochures intended for students' hands wind up instead in the counselor's garbage can. In addition to word of mouth publicity among students, teachers, and parents, gay and lesbian advocacy groups forward information via e-mail and on Web sites.

The number of applications has varied from year to year, as have the number of awards given (see Table 1). Scholars have come from all parts of the state and all types of schools. Applications are reviewed by the scholarship committee, which is comprised of gay, lesbian, and straight people. Since its inception in 2000, the Matthew Shepard Scholarship has awarded more than 80 honorary and full scholarships, totaling more than one million dollars in educational opportunities.

**Table 1**

Matthew Shepard Scholarship Applicants and Awards for  
2000–2007

Year	Applications	Full Scholarships Awarded	Honorary Awards
2000	11	3	7
2001	4	3	0
2002	10	4	3
2003	7	3	2
2004	16	7	6
2005	17	5	10
2006	17	5	10
2007	18	4	14
Total	100	34	52

## Methods

I served as a high school principal when the Matthew Shepard Scholarship was established and met Rich Eychaner when he presented the award to a student in my school. A couple of years later, as a university faculty member, I became increasingly interested in studying the lives and experiences of gay and lesbian high school students.

However, gaining access to gay and lesbian students presents some significant challenges for researchers. First, many schools are reluctant to acknowledge the presence of gay and lesbian students, much less allow research into their lives and experiences. Second, the homophobic atmosphere found in many schools keeps many students in the closet. Finally, high school students' status as minors further complicates the prospect of conducting research in this area.

The Matthew Shepard Scholars, however, represent a different situation. Their status as adults and college students made

them more accessible than high school students. In addition, they were openly gay or lesbian and had been publicly identified as Matthew Shepard Scholars. I thus elected to employ purposeful sampling (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001) for this exploratory study.

After explaining my interest to Rich Eychaner, the founder of the scholarship, I drafted a letter inviting the scholars to participate in my research. He drafted an accompanying letter to the scholars that reinforced that their participation was completely voluntary and that he and I had discussed the project. Rich sent both letters to all of the current Matthew Shepard Scholars.

I received positive responses from 8 scholars who ranged from college freshmen to college juniors. I conducted interviews over a 7-month period. Drawing upon Eisner's (1998) suggestions for understanding events from the subject's point of view, I used guided in-depth questions to allow the scholars to relate their experiences in their own words. Although I developed a list of specific questions to guide our discussions, our conversations were typically free-flowing conversations initiated by my question, "Tell me about growing up." The interviews took place in locations selected by the participants, usually coffee shops or restaurants near their university campuses. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

Following transcription, I used peer debriefing with faculty colleagues (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001) as a means of analyzing the data from the interviews. As I worked through the transcripts, I sought to help readers relate to the students' experiences. Thus, I elected not to use formal coding, and instead employed a narrative analysis. Silverman (2000) offered narrative analysis as a valid means for understanding "respondent's answers as cultural stories" (p. 824). McMillan and Schumacher (2001) defined an effective narrative as "one that may be read and lived by others" (p. 417).

Stake (1995) and Van Maanen (1998) identified narratives as an effective way to allow readers to gain a sense of the uniqueness of particular cases. To this end, I created eight separate narratives, drawing heavily on the students' own words and

descriptions of events. In all cases, pseudonyms for scholars were used in an effort to ensure anonymity, despite the fact that the scholars have been publicly identified. After the narratives were written, I sent them electronically to the scholars for member checks (Janesick, 2000; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001) and made corrections and clarifications when needed.

## Findings

The students interviewed identified with the many difficulties and challenges common to being a sexual minority in schools. All of the students, to one degree or another, related stories of harassment, substance abuse, social isolation, and depression prior to coming out.

Although the students hailed from different backgrounds and their situations varied, coming out represented a crucial turning point in their young lives. Like many other gay and lesbian students, they reported feelings of uncertainty prior to coming out (Griffin, 1992; Sanelli & Perreault, 2001). They also reported significant feelings of relief, liberation, and energy after coming out (Cass, 1979; Flowers & Buston, 2001; Troiden, 1989).

The key finding in this research is the extent to which receiving the Matthew Shepard Scholarship further transformed the students' lives after coming out. Each had struggled through various degrees of social and personal difficulties. Coming out was a watershed event. Being selected as a Matthew Shepard Scholar further magnified their confidence, aspirations, and educational opportunities. It also provided a vehicle through which they could pursue higher education—something that had previously seemed out of reach for many of the students.

The scholarship impacted the students in different ways. For some, it provided new motivation to fully engage in high school. Others described how it exposed them, for the first time, to positive gay role models. For others, the scholarship eliminated financial and confidence barriers that once stood between them and a college education. Their rich stories are a vehicle for under-

standing how the scholarship sent all of them on a new trajectory of academic and social success in college that was vastly different from the isolation and academic difficulties they had experienced before. Following are individual accounts of how the Matthew Shepard Scholarship contributed to this transformation.

### *Mark*

Applying for the Matthew Shepard Scholarship was, for Mark, a natural. A couple years earlier, he had met another Matthew Shepard Scholar from a small, rural high school not far from his blue-collar city. After becoming friends, Mark planned to apply when he became eligible as a senior. When he was selected as a winner, he said doors of opportunity began to swing open. “[Scholarship officials] called me and I, like immediately was like [Wow!]. And, you know, I think it opened a lot of doors before I even knew that they were there, as far as, you know, possibilities” (personal interview, September 19, 2004).

Pressed for specifics, Mark described how the Matthew Shepard Scholarship had provided him freedom from financial concerns in college. “I can spend more time doing things I want because I don’t have to worry about money . . .” he explained (personal interview, September 19, 2004). He also spoke about the valuable network and connections he made with other scholars, supporters, and members of the gay and lesbian adult community.

. . . once I got to [Des Moines] for the first time . . . for the awards presentation . . . I started meeting all the people who were involved in the scholarship, as well as a lot of [Des Moines] people who were just GLBT. It started opening a lot of doors and you know, you’re getting people who can be resources and be helpful. (personal interview, September 19, 2004)

Mark knew that the networking with other scholars and successful adult members of the gay and lesbian community had

been enlightening for him, as well as many other scholars. He said that he appreciated the value of these relationships, currently and in the future. Mark suspected that seeing the community, both gay/lesbian and straight, that was behind the scholarship was especially beneficial and meaningful for his parents.

As a college student, he established a statewide bimonthly magazine that focused on youth gay and lesbian issues. Mark has graduated from college with a degree in electronic communication and accepted a job in television production. He said he is now thinking of pursuing a master's degree, building toward the ultimate goal of establishing a statewide news channel "to kind of mix it up, in a way that's never been done" (personal interview, September 19, 2004).

### *Jackie*

Jackie dealt with apprehension toward coming out for several years, partly due to an atmosphere of compulsory heterosexuality in her high school. Issues surrounding sexual orientation were virtually nonexistent in the curricula. If gay and lesbian issues came up in a class discussion, teachers quickly squelched them. She felt enormous pressure to pass for straight, and she tried dating boys.

Jackie had long been involved in the school's talented and gifted program, but found herself struggling to balance her true feelings with what was demanded at school—heterosexuality. She made a conscious decision to let her grades slide as an effort to blend into the straight crowd at school.

I tried to be a student; I just tried to be normal. And, that's when it got really difficult, because I was afraid of being the "A student." I was afraid of being something else they could poke fun at . . . I avoided anything that could put a spotlight on me . . . I wanted to be the "average student." (personal interview, September 19, 2004)

After summoning the courage to come out, however, Jackie came alive. Her confidence and energy reappeared. She found

new energy and resolve. "I [read] a lot of books for fun finally . . . I could go out and learn everything. I could go out and be in the community. I wanted to learn what I could do," she explained (personal interview, September 19, 2004).

Jackie found that one of the things she could accomplish was educate the teachers about the needs of gay and lesbian students. In response to Jackie's scholarship and the awareness it generated, the school asked her to help develop "Educator Awareness Workshops" for teachers, focused on increasing awareness of subtle, as well as overt harassment of gay and lesbian students, including those who were perceived by others to be gay and lesbian.

In these workshops, Jackie helped the teachers understand the impact of homophobic language, jokes, and classroom climate problems from her own experience. She suggested ways teachers could intervene. Jackie said that the workshops, the attention generated by her coming out, and the scholarship made many teachers much more vigilant at correcting students who made inappropriate comments.

As a Matthew Shepard Scholar, Jackie found support and encouragement for her future. She took comfort in knowing that there were people ready and willing to "back me up." Jackie also felt a sense of duty and membership in a cause. ". . . I really feel that I, in a sense, owe it to them. I want to go back and make sure that they made an investment, I suppose, in me. And, I definitely plan on being involved in the community" (personal interview, September 19, 2004). This was in stark contrast to the time when she let her straight-A grades slide intentionally, in an effort to avoid any attention being placed on her.

Jackie hoped to increase her involvement in community education on gay and lesbian issues. Someday, she sees herself fulfilling a role supporting other youth with questions about sexual orientation—someone who is available when needed. She explained, "I'd like to do community centers . . . I'm there, where we can talk . . . I know what I need to do . . . I'm definitely thinking advocacy . . . possible counseling and social work . . . possibly grad school" (personal interview, September 19, 2004).

*Steve*

Across the state, Steve reported a similar impact of the Matthew Shepard Scholarship. Although he began high school as an isolated, almost invisible entity, he had steadily gained confidence and developed into an academically and socially successful student in his college-town high school. Although he experienced virtually no harassment at school, events one night at a school dance prompted him to call for action.

Steve had received permission to attend the school's Valentine's dance with his boyfriend—something that no one could remember happening before, even at his school of 1,700 students. When they arrived at the dance, they were denied the couple's admission price, despite the fact that he had informed the principal of his plan to bring his boyfriend. On the dance floor, he and his date were harassed when others intentionally bumped into them, simulated anal sex acts, and threw objects at them.

Steve wrote a piece for the school paper to make teachers and students aware of what had happened at the dance. It became a major story in the school, gaining considerable attention from both students and staff. Sharing his writing with peers had previously been difficult, but he now had a cause.

His article caught the attention of a state civil rights group and the local school board. In the end, Steve successfully worked through established channels to establish a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at school, as well as to enact uniform admission prices to dances for all attendees. In addition, school dances now require more chaperones to ensure students' safety.

Despite the impact of his article and efforts with the school board, Steve did not think he could win a Matthew Shepard Scholarship. In fact, he recalled taking the phone call from the scholarship committee. Steve thought that he was about to receive, "like a consolation prize." When he heard that instead he had been awarded one of the full tuition Matthew Shepard Scholarships, he said, "I was like, are we talking the big one, like the one that covers *everything*? I couldn't believe it" (personal interview, October 21, 2004).

He said the scholarship

. . . gives an amazing example of a gay person. Rich [the Scholarship founder] and all the people that . . . gave the scholarship are great examples of you know, regular people, who are openly gay and they're doing regular things. And, some of them are in very professional fields. Some of them are important members of the community. (personal interview, October 21, 2004)

Steve's scholarship allowed him an opportunity to attend college, which might not have happened otherwise. His parents divorced when he was in junior high and his sister was attending an expensive private university. Knowing this, he said, "It would have been very difficult for me to go to school if I didn't have a lot of [financial] help . . ." (personal interview, October 21, 2004). Steve was studying how technology impacted audiology and intended to pursue additional study in cochlear implants or speech pathology, with the ultimate goal of applying these skills in a hospital or research setting.

### ***Brad***

Brad's transformation was no less remarkable. He said he, "was never really accepted into anything" in school (personal interview, January 28, 2005). In the early years, this was due to his rapid physical maturity as a child, large physical size, depression, and high intelligence. He recalled that the family ". . . found out through the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills that I'm talented and gifted. I couldn't really believe that, but I tested high enough to get into some, like, more accelerated classes" (personal interview, January 28, 2005). Despite his academic prowess, he remained isolated and withdrawn.

In high school, his sexual orientation provided one more reason for isolation. In an effort to cope with his apathy, isolation, and depression, Brad turned to food. He recalled, "I was isolated, I didn't have anyone to talk to. I didn't have the friends, but

food was always there. Food didn't call me names. It didn't treat me like crap." Although he was earning good grades, he said he lacked interest in much of anything. "Like, I didn't care if I did this or that . . . I just wasn't interested in doing lots of things . . . it didn't matter" (personal interview, January 28, 2005).

After coming out, establishing his first real friendships, and generating the confidence to apply for and receive the Matthew Shepard Scholarship, Brad spoke convincingly about the impact it had on his life. He began to take more of an interest in himself and his appearance. He also took more of an interest in his studies. Whereas before, he could, "just crap out a paper 20 minutes before they needed it," he "was starting to write better essays, like they were a little bit more humorous, or at least a lot more honest. [Teachers] liked the fact that I would put effort into my research and do interesting things" (personal interview, January 28, 2005).

Brad was an active member of the theatre department at his university and had taken a leadership role in pushing the theatre department to offer "progressive" productions that "open up people's minds." He was active in establishing the university's first officially recognized gay fraternity. He said the scholarship eased considerable financial pressures and allowed him to focus on making the most of his college experience.

I don't have to worry about going into massive debt. I can study. I can go to group things, I can work on shows for my department. I can save money for a work abroad program, which I got to do [at Edinburgh, Scotland].  
(personal interview, January 28, 2005)

When I noted that his passion seems a long way from the depressed and isolated high school student he once was, he responded, "I've completely changed, probably for the better . . . [as a result of] coming out and the Matthew Shepard Scholarship" (personal interview, January 28, 2005).

*Joe*

Joe attended a large and diverse urban high school. Unlike some of the other Matthew Shepard Scholars' schools, he said there were many openly gay or lesbian students at school. He joked that, "everyone at [his school] is either gay or Black." Despite this, Joe was reluctant to come out. He had always been an excellent student, involved in Advanced Placement courses. As he struggled with his sexual orientation and whether to disclose it, his grades suffered and his academic confidence faltered. It was, "hard to focus on school" (personal interview, November 16, 2004).

Joe decided to visit a gay and lesbian student group that drew members from across the city. Once there, he began building relationships with other gay and lesbian students. Joe explained, "... That's where I met [Cassie, another Matthew Shepard Scholar]" (personal interview, November 16, 2004). He soon became interested in gay rights causes and intrigued by the prospect of winning a Matthew Shepard Scholarship.

He knew that, in addition to academics, community service was a criterion for the award. He said his initial motivations were self-serving and were intended to build his resume for the scholarship, but that the experience brought him alive. "... I worked my butt off originally, but to be quite honest, like, it was just for the scholarship. But, then I actually started liking it. Like, I found my passion" (personal interview, November 16, 2004).

Joe's passion led him in new directions and exposed him to political causes and leaders. Engaging in these causes and meeting political figures, such as Senator Hillary Clinton, propelled him to run for a student government position at school. He began to consider a future in politics or law.

Joe saw the Matthew Shepard Scholarship as far more than a monetary award. He viewed it as an extension of the passion he unexpectedly found as he positioned himself to apply. He explained, "I've seen how important it is . . . not just a \$6,000 scholarship for 4 years . . . there's more to it than that" (personal

interview, November 16, 2004). He saw the award as an incentive to get involved in a cause larger than himself.

### *Aaron*

In interviews, Aaron described almost constant harassment from peers. This, along with a turbulent home life, sent him down a path of clinical depression, plummeting grades, and exploitation by an older gay man. In the spring of his senior year, one of his teachers urged him to apply for the scholarship. Aaron did, although he told his mother he seriously doubted that he would win.

When he was invited to Des Moines for a scholarship finalist interview, he was “freaking out . . . going crazy and stuff” (personal interview, September 17, 2004). Aaron said the experience at the interview opened his and his mother’s eyes to his future possibilities. The application and interview experience pushed Aaron toward higher education. At the time of the interview, college seemed too remote a possibility. He had not even completed his college applications.

His selection as a Matthew Shepard Scholar a few weeks later strengthened his resolve to confront rampant harassment at school. Attending college became a reality and a priority. He redoubled his academic efforts. Asked if being awarded the scholarship empowered him, he recalled,

Probably in large part. I was just like, I don’t have to take this shit [the harassment]. I had to take this shit in the fall. I’m being who I am and getting through this all. I’m behind in my schoolwork and I need to catch up. (personal interview, September 17, 2004)

Aaron was active in his university’s debate team, and he saw the scholarship as a meaningful vehicle for future success, noting internship opportunities on the horizon. He also noted the importance of the college-preparation retreat sponsored by scholarship officials. He said this retreat addressed essential issues

such as how to succeed in college, as well as the social challenges that come from being gay or lesbian *and* being publicly identified as a Matthew Shepard Scholar. His sights were set on law school.

### *Cassie*

Although Cassie attended a high school of 1,700 students on the outskirts of a large city, she battled a considerable degree of torment and isolation. Her battles included struggling with a principal who seemed bent on preventing the establishment of a GSA at school. Working through many official channels, however, Cassie prevailed.

Cassie had always been a capable, successful student. As word of her sexual orientation spread through her school, she faced a considerable degree of harassment, such as a student's threat to "start the antigay KKK" (personal interview, October 7, 2004). Her activism and the stress brought by harassment took a toll on her grades. She remembers that she:

. . . felt like I had to fight every battle . . . I was kind of ignoring the academics of school and focusing on the battle. And, it, it caught up to me . . . I was so upset with myself . . . that I let my grades drop, because, you know, I'd always thought of myself as a good student. (personal interview, October 7, 2004)

Although her grades as a senior were not as high as in her junior year, she regained her academic footing. As a senior, she found herself in Advanced Placement Composition, where she engaged in a discussion of gay rights, religion, and harassment. It was a complicated balancing act between activism and good grades. But, it provided good practice for college and beyond.

She said her scholarship and life as a Matthew Shepard Scholar transcended the money and bonds between scholars. She saw the scholarship and her role as a recipient as part of a larger legacy, explaining, ". . . it's so much more than a name. What did

the name really mean? The Matthew Shepard story is such a difficult story. In memory of him, to have this opportunity. It is just amazing.” She continued:

We all had our battles in high school, and of course we’re going to have battles the rest of our lives. It’s not going to stop after we graduate from college. I mean for a long time. The scholarship has so much potential. It’s flourishing and doing great things. (personal interview, October 7, 2004)

### *David*

David’s path through his small town school was marked by isolation, nine suicide attempts, and complicated questions about his family’s deep Christian faith. He consciously avoided social situations, instead pouring himself into his studies. He remembered, “I’d lie awake at night and pray that God would take my life or take the feelings away so that I wouldn’t have to deal with them . . . because I had been taught that it was a sin” (personal interview, October 10, 2004).

“I didn’t do anything but study, because I was afraid of people getting to know me,” David explained. Focusing completely on his schoolwork provided him with a way to avoid social situations. Isolated and suicidal, he found himself identifying with “all those outrageous [gay] guests” on the television talk show “Sally.” He knew it was not a positive image, but “I kind of identified with them and thought, ‘I think that’s me’” (personal interview, October 10, 2004).

During his coming out process, his family was supportive, although they too worked to reconcile their religious beliefs and David’s sexual orientation. Professional counseling and unexpectedly positive reactions from some peers helped him gain confidence and social footing. He gradually became more engaged in the life of a typical high school student and developed a healthier outlook toward himself, grades, and the future. He reflected that “. . . if I would have gotten a B my freshman

year, I think that might have been enough to encourage a suicide attempt” (personal interview, October 10, 2004). His transformation continued as he became more involved with the scholarship and its requisite college preparation seminars. In addition, David’s interaction and connection with the gay and lesbian community that made up the network around the scholarship grew. He explained:

I met all the scholars and it was really the first interaction with other gay people that I’d had. And so, that was a good thing too . . . In [his hometown] I might be the only [gay] one, but in the world, I’m not. (personal interview, October 10, 2004)

David’s transformation may be best identified by a memorable speech he delivered at the Des Moines Pride Fest—one that is frequently mentioned by other gay and lesbian youth. He was out to the university marching band of 300 members, directed a GLBT Bible study, and was an advisor to the university on GLBT issues.

He has set his sights on a master’s degree in clinical counseling. Of the entire experience and scholarship, David said, “I’m definitely a different person, but I definitely still remember what it felt like . . . if I hadn’t gone through that, then I probably wouldn’t be the person who I am today” (personal interview, October 10, 2004).

## Summary and Recommendations for Educators

The students’ experiences reinforce the well-documented pain of isolation, depression, fear, and harassment that often comes with being a sexual minority in high school. These experiences often affect their academic achievement. Their accounts also lead to a number of important recommendations for educators. First among these is the essential need for teachers, counselors, and

administrators to increase their awareness and acknowledgment of the unique and serious challenges many gay and lesbian students face.

Educators must accept the challenge and moral responsibility of establishing appropriate educational environments. Vile harassment that is both well documented and often ignored (Aaron's interview, September 17, 2004; Cassie's interview, October, 7, 2004; GLSEN, 2003; HRW, 2001; Jackie's interview, September 1, 2004) must be aggressively addressed through policy (Harbeck, 1995; MacGillivray, 2004) and the actions of individual educators and students themselves. Jackie's school should be commended for establishing its Educator Awareness Workshops, yet we know that her school is unique. The literature demonstrates that information on sexual orientation is rarely seen in public schools (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1994; Rofes, 1995). Teacher, administrator, and counselor education programs must heed the call to do more to prepare future educators in this regard. These changes will require courage at all levels.

Second, educators must view gay and lesbian students as people, not as problems. Efforts to understand and acknowledge the perils gay and lesbian students face must be increased, along with the realization that the prospects for gay and lesbian youth are not inevitably bad. This will require a shift away from the problem-focused view that is often applied to gay and lesbian youth. Kielwasser and Wolf (as cited in Unks, 1995) noted that a ". . . historic emphasis on the psychosocial *problems* faced by lesbian and gay youth has frequently obscured any systematic consideration of their particular *talents*" (p. 8, italics added).

Focusing on the humanity and potential of gay and lesbian students rather than the alleged differences will assist educators in realizing that these students share much in common with their heterosexual peers. The students in this study lived in a variety of settings, from suburbia, to rural areas, to college towns, to urban high schools. They had varying future goals, ranging from broadcasting (Mark's interview, September, 18, 2004), to graduate school (David's interview, October 10, 2004; Jackie's interview, September 1, 2004), to practicing law (Aaron's interview,

September 17, 2004). As noted by Miceli (2002) and Savin-Williams (1990, 2005), their aspirations, settings, and talents are not particularly distinguishable from those of other students.

What is distinguishable is that they needed a bit of extra support to overcome some significant obstacles to experience success. The Matthew Shepard Scholarship provided that essential support. Although the students' stories revealed variations in the way the scholarship impacted them, in all instances the effect was a watershed academic event. Regardless of the problems they faced, the scholarship recognized their promise and potential. And, when potential is recognized and fostered, it can be actualized.

The scholarship provided these students opportunity and incentive to overcome obstacles, succeed academically, and pursue college and advanced degrees. The students often described how the scholarship provided an "investment in me" (Jackie's interview, September 1, 2004), how it refocused their academic efforts (Aaron's interview, September 17, 2004), and provided a way to finance higher education (Brad's interview, January 28, 2005; Joe's interview, November 16, 2004; Steve's interview, October 21, 2005). Absent this, these students may have languished academically, socially, or emotionally.

Were it not for the scholarship, with its focus on the students as people with talents and potential, the academic promise of the students in this study may well have been lost or unrealized. This raises an obvious concern: How many other gay and lesbian students with similar struggles and talents have been left behind?

The accounts of the scholarship's impact demonstrate that, given the right support and understanding, the chance exists for students to realize their potential. Philanthropists, scholarship officials, and those concerned with increasing student achievement and access to higher education should take note of the powerful impact of the scholarship.

Third, educators must be wary of being derailed or distracted by debates about the origins of sexual orientation and gay marriage. Fear and the intense political debate surrounding these issues may lead some to avoid anything or anyone connected

to gay and lesbian students. Fear of confronting these issues, especially in particularly homophobic atmospheres, is perhaps understandable. Yet, these fears too frequently result in educators' viewing gay and lesbian students as problems to be ignored, feared, or fixed. Further, it may distract from the obligation to serve all students, not just those who are from dominant social, racial, economic groups, or who are politically convenient or easy to support.

Finally, these students' stories point to the need for additional research into the lives of gay and lesbian students. Although gaining access to gay adolescents presents real barriers for researchers, attention to this understudied and misunderstood population is essential. Additional research will contribute significantly to the aforementioned goals of greater understanding and awareness, moving beyond the problem-focused perspective, and increasing access to higher education. Without a further understanding of gay and lesbian students' lives, many schools will continue to fail them, more students will be pathologized—their talents unrealized, their dreams denied. In such a scenario, everyone loses.

## References

- Blumenfeld, W. J. (1995). Gay/straight alliances: Transforming pain to pride. In G. Unks (Ed.), *The gay teen: Educational practice and theory for lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents* (pp. 210–224). New York: Routledge.
- Cass, V. C. (1979). Homosexual identity formation: A theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 4, 219–235.
- Eisner, E. W. (1998). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Elia, J. P. (1993). Homophobia in the high school: A problem in need of a solution. *The High School Journal*, 77, 177–185.
- Flowers, P., & Buston, K. (2001). I was terrified of being different: Exploring gay men's accounts of growing-up in a heterosexist society. *Journal of Adolescence*, 24, 51–65.
- Fontaine, J. H. (1997). The sound of silence: Public school response to the needs of gay and lesbian youth. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*, 7(4), 101–109.

- Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN). (2003). *The 2003 national school climate survey*. Retrieved May 19, 2005, from [http://www.glsen.org/binary-data/GLSEN\\_ATTACHMENTS/file/300-3.PDF](http://www.glsen.org/binary-data/GLSEN_ATTACHMENTS/file/300-3.PDF)
- Gonisorek, J. C., & Rudolf, J. R. (1991). Homosexual identity: Coming out and other developmental events. In J. C. Gonisorek & J. D. Weinrich (Eds.), *Homosexuality: Research implications for public policy* (pp. 161–176). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Griffin, P. (1992). From hiding out to coming out: Empowering lesbian and gay educators. In K. Harbeck (Ed.), *Coming out of the classroom closet* (pp. 167–196). New York: Haworth Press.
- Harbeck, K. M. (1995). Invisible no more: Addressing the needs of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth and their advocates. In G. Unks (Ed.), *The gay teen: Educational practice and theory for lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents* (pp. 125–134). New York: Routledge.
- Harris, M. B., & Bliss, G. K. (1997). Coming out in a school setting: Former students' experiences about disclosure. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*, 7(4), 85–100.
- Herek, G. M. (1984). Beyond homophobia: A social psychological perspective on attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 10, 1–21.
- Hetrick, E. S., & Martin, A. D. (1987). Developmental issues and their resolution for gay and lesbian adolescents. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 14, 25–43.
- Human Rights Watch (HRW). (2001). *Hatred in the hallways: Violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students in U.S. schools*. New York: Author.
- Janesick, V. J. (2000). The choreography of qualitative research design: Minuets, improvisations, and crystallization. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 379–399). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Jordan, K. M., Vaughan, J. S., & Woodworth, K. J. (1997). I will survive: Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth's experience of high school. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*, 7(4), 17–33.
- Kielwasser, A. P., & Wolf, M. A. (1994). Silence, difference, and annihilation: Understanding the impact of mediated heterosexism on high school students. *The High School Journal*, 77, 58–79.
- MacGillivray, I. K. (2004). *Sexual orientation and school policy: A practical guide for teachers, administrators, and community activists*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

- Massachusetts Department of Education. (2003). *2003 Massachusetts youth risk behavior survey*. Retrieved May 15, 2005, from [http://www.doe.mass.edu/hssss/yrbs/03/execsum\\_results.pdf](http://www.doe.mass.edu/hssss/yrbs/03/execsum_results.pdf)
- McMillan, J. H., & Schumacher, S. (2001). *Research in education: A conceptual introduction* (5th ed.). New York: Longman.
- Miceli, M. S. (2002). Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. In S. Seidman & D. Richardson (Eds.), *Handbook of gay and lesbian studies* (pp. 199–214). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- O'Connor, A. (1995). Who gets called queer in school: Lesbian, gay, and bisexual teenagers, homophobia in high school. In G. Unks (Ed.), *The gay teen: Educational practice and theory for lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents* (pp. 95–101). New York: Routledge.
- Owens, R. E. (1998). *Queer kids: The challenges and promise for lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth*. Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press.
- Pederson, W. B. (1994). HIV risk in gay and lesbian adolescents. In T. DeCrescenzo (Ed.), *Helping gay and lesbian youth: New policies, new programs, new practice* (pp. 131–148). New York: Haworth Press.
- Raissiguier, C. (1997, Winter). Negotiating school, identity, and desire. *Educational Foundations*, 31–54.
- Remafedi, G. J. (1990). Fundamental issues in the care of homosexual youth. *Adolescent Magazine*, 74, 1169–1179.
- Rofes, E. (1995). Making our schools safe for sissies. In G. Unks (Ed.), *The gay teen: Educational practice and theory for lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents* (pp. 79–84). New York: Routledge.
- Russell, T. G. (1989). AIDS education, homosexuality, and the counselor's role. *The School Counselor*, 36, 333–337.
- Sanelli, M., & Perreault, G. (2001). I could be anybody: Gay, lesbian, and bisexual students in U.S. schools. *NASSP Bulletin*, 85(62), 69–78.
- Savin-Williams, R. (1990). *Gay and lesbian youth: Expressions of identity*. New York: Hemisphere.
- Savin-Williams, R. (2005). *The new gay teenager*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sears, J. T. (1988). Growing up gay: Is there anyone there to listen? *American School Counselors Newsletter*, 26, 8–9.
- Sears, J. T. (1992). Educators, homosexuality, and homosexual students: Are personal feelings related to professional beliefs? *Journal of Homosexuality*, 22, 29–79.

- Silverman, D. (2000). Analyzing talk and text. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 821–834). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Telljohann, S. K., & Price, J. H. (1993). A qualitative examination of adolescent homosexuals' life experiences: Ramifications for secondary school personnel. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 26, 41–56.
- Troiden, R. R. (1989). The formation of homosexual identities. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 17, 43–73.
- Unks, G. (Ed.). (1995). *The gay teen: Educational practice and theory for lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents*. New York: Routledge.
- Unks, G. (2003). Thinking about the gay teen. In A. Darder, M. Baltodano, & R. D. Torres (Eds.), *The critical pedagogy reader* (pp. 322–330). New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Van Maanen, J. (1988). *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.