

HATE CRIMES AGAINST GAYS CONTINUE BUT NECESSARY LEGISLATION IS STALLED

By Nick Gier

On October 7, 1998, Matthew Shepard met two men in a bar in Laramie, Wyoming. The men pretended that they were gay, and after some conversation, they offered Shepard a ride home.

The men drove him to a ranch outside of Laramie, pistol whipped him, tied him to a fence pole, and left him to die. Eighteen hours later a cyclist came by, and after the horrific realization that Shepard was not the scarecrow they initially thought, he notified authorities.

Fred Phelps, minister of Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas declared that Shepard's blood was on the hands of every person who supported the rights of gays, lesbians, bisexual, and transgendered people (GLBT). Phelps and members his congregation protested at Shepard's funeral, holding signs such as "Matthew Shepard Rots in Hell."

How can these Baptists have it so viciously wrong? It is they, not us, who have exacerbated the problems of gays and lesbians living in our society.

In the ancient world, when someone was beaten, tortured, and hung on a post, it was called a crucifixion. So I say to those hate mongers in Topeka: "Matthew Shepard died for your homophobic sins."

Ten years after the crucifixion of Matthew Shepard, hate crimes against the GLBT community still continue. From 2006 to 2007 the national numbers rose from 1,415 to 1,460 reported incidents. Attacks against GLBTs accounted for 15.9 percent of all hate crimes. The largest number is still racially motivated at 59 percent.

In 2007 Washington State's percentage was much higher: of the 104 crimes reported, 39 nine involved GLBTs. Four attacks, three on transgendered students,

on the Washington State University campus three weeks ago will be added, sadly, to the 2008 figures.

WSU's GLBT student president Nikki Hahn stated: "We just had an entire Pride Week of events, followed by Week Without Violence, and we were very visible as a community. I don't think the attacks were a coincidence."

On September 29, eight miles away on the University of Idaho campus, a gay student returned to his dorm home to find a death threat written on his personal message board. On October 10, over 200 students and faculty turned out to denounce the act and surveillance cameras were installed in the student's hallway. On October 29 a rally against hate was held at WSU with large numbers of students and faculty in attendance.

Washington does include sexual orientation in its hate crime statute, but the Idaho Legislature has refused add extra sanctions to crimes involving GLBT persons. The police detective said that even if they caught the perpetrators, the only charge against them would be malicious injury to property.

In 1993 the Supreme Court ruled as constitutional a Wisconsin hate crime law that enhanced the punishment of perpetrators who intentionally select their victims because of race or sexual orientation.

As a leader on progressive issues, Massachusetts passed a comprehensive hate crime statute in 1979 that the state has experienced a 67 percent reduction in these sorts of infractions.

Hate crime ordinances that include GLBT persons now exist in 31 states, and 14 states exclude them. Even after Shepard's death, Wyoming, along with Arkansas, Georgia, Indiana, and South Carolina, do not have any hate crime legislation at all.

The Matthew Shepard Act, a federal hate crime bill, was passed by the House on May 3, 2007, and it passed the Senate on September 29 of the same year.

It did not become law because its sponsors realized that they could not override President Bush's threatened veto.

True to his poor voting record, John McCain was not in the Senate to vote, but he said that he would have opposed the bill. Barack Obama and Joe Biden voted for the Matthew Shepard Act.

On the 10th anniversary of Shepard's death, GLBT students at Texas Christian University put up a sign at the student union on which "Caution: Live Acts of Homosexuality in Progress" was written. They were brazenly chatting, laughing, reading books, listening to music, drinking, and eating.

These people are truly just like you and me. They are members of our families, students at our schools, and citizens of our communities. They want to live their lives to the fullest and have the same opportunities as all of us do. Contrary to right wing insinuations, GLBT persons are not more immoral than the rest of us.

We in the majority too often taken for granted our right to express ourselves freely without any fear of reprisal or discrimination. There was a time when couples of mixed race were at terrible risk of expressing affection in public.

I hope there will come a day in America when all of its citizens can exercise all the rights of a free people.

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Read his essay "The Real Meaning of Sodomy" at www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/sodomy.htm.