
CAMPUS IN CRISIS

Wyoming Union leads grieving, recovering efforts after hate crime

By Bill Fruth, Susie Arnold, and
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On Wednesday evening, Oct. 5, 1998, about three miles east of Laramie, Wyo., a 21-year-old University of Wyoming student from Casper, Wyo., was found robbed, severely beaten, and tied to a fence. Two Laramie residents soon were charged with attempted murder in the attack that has been labeled a hate crime. In addition, the defendants' girlfriends were charged as accessories after the fact in connection with the crime.

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

The role of the Wyoming Union

Like any other college union, the Wyoming Union is a central part of daily cam-

pus life. The Union is located in the heart of the campus with about 10,000 people passing through on a daily basis. At first news of the attack on Shepard, the Wyoming Union provided a foundation for the university's and students' reactions.

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

The Wyoming Union was closely connected to the tragedy and recovery on a professional level because of the positive relationships nurtured among the CAC staff, Union staff, student leaders, student organizations, and organization advisers. An additional dynamic intensified the Union's staff involvement on a personal level. Chasity Pasley, the only university student charged in connection with the crime, was an employee in the CAC for 1½ years. Pasley was a valued student employee who had been recognized for her contributions as an outstanding employee. Pasley's arrest and apparent involvement in the crime caused feelings of disappointment, frustration, and bewilderment among Union staff members. The staff's sense of involvement was challenged both professionally and personally.

Because of the police investigation, the Union staff first became aware of the inci-

Homophobia continues on campuses after Wyoming murder

By Shane L. Windmeyer

Little has seemed to change on college campuses since the murder of Matthew Shepard. Campus reports over the past six months have sent mixed signals on whether Shepard's murder has transformed the campus attitude toward gays or caused officials to take any immediate action to impact the campus environment toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students.

This past March, one similar campus hate crime occurred with a student at Tufts University in Medford, Mass. According to Tufts campus news reports, the victim was accosted and severely beaten but survived the attack. The student was suspected to be gay when walking home from an off-campus party. Angry and frustrated straight and gay students reportedly rallied and demanded the university take action. Sophomore Jason Fox said in a campus news report: "When you let these things go, you're justifying them, and hate grows and grows and in the end someone gets hurt or ends up dead."

Emporia State University in Emporia, Kan., this past November, just a month after Shepard's murder, chose to remove "sexual orientation" from the university non-discrimination statement after having included the statement for seven years. The university lawyers were fearful of legal threats and liability issues. A few months later, Florida Board of Regents did not include sexual orientation

for the state higher education system for similar reasons. Only about 320 colleges and universities in the United States include "sexual orientation" in their non-discrimination statements.

These select campus news reports over the past six months only touch the surface level of homophobia in today's college setting. Such campus reports seem contradictory to what one might suspect in the wake of Shepard's murder and even in light of other recent high-profile hate crimes such as the Texas man, James Byrd, who was dragged to death behind a pickup truck last year and the most recent gay hate crime case involving an Alabama man, Billy Jack Gaither, who was beaten to death and burned on a pile of tires.

It is not surprising that gay, lesbian, and bisexual students find harassment as just another part of campus life. Verbal abuse is all too commonplace. A study released in August by Karen Franklin, a forensic psychologist at the Washington Institute for Mental Illness Research and Training, reiterates the view that harassment and hate crimes against gay students by their peers is the norm. According to the study, nearly one-quarter of community college students participating in this survey admitted to harassing people they perceived to be gay. Among men, 18 percent said they had physically assaulted or threatened someone they thought was gay or lesbian, and 32 percent admitted they were guilty of verbal harassment.

The issue of homophobia only becomes more evident when looking at the attitudes of future campus members. A survey of the 1998 Who's Who in High School students shows half of the highest achieving high school students admit to prejudice against gays and lesbians, an increase of 19 percentage points over the previous year. When asked, "Are you prejudiced against homosexuals?" 15 percent said "very," and 33 percent "somewhat."

Homophobia is far reaching on col-

lege campuses and manifests itself in the actions and attitudes of the academic setting. A homophobic environment manifests itself in many ways, including:

- Homophobia reaches into the classroom setting when college professors either leave gays out of the academic discussion or trivialize gay issues.
- Homophobia persists when top university administrators never mention the words "gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender" in speeches or even statements about respect and tolerance for diversity on campus.
- Homophobia breeds more homophobia when universities do not explicitly state that discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation is expressly prohibited and will not be tolerated.
- Lack of visible campus role models who are allies or "out" members of the campus community only serve to readily allow passivity and encourage homophobia to feed on myths, stereotypes, and forms of prejudice.
- Homophobia spreads when perpetrators of such harassment do not fear sanctions to make them accountable for such actions and when the university process for reporting gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender harassment is not widely publicized or utilized on campus.

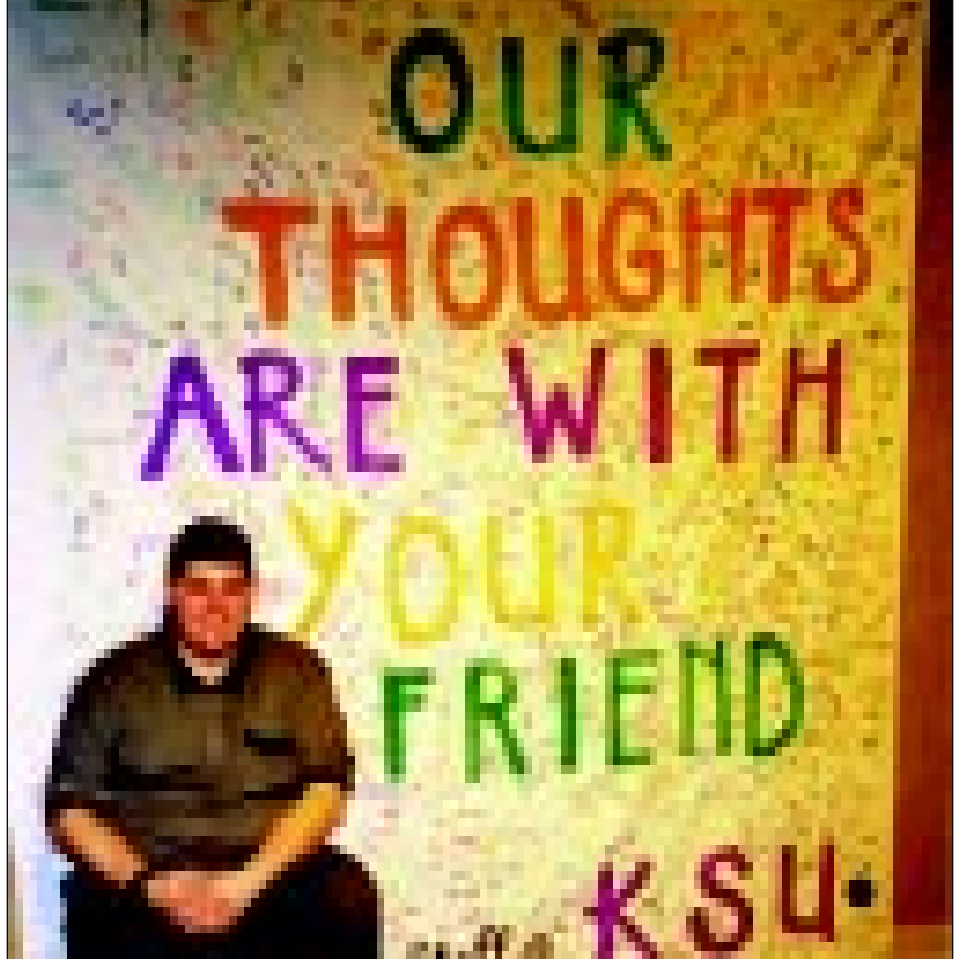
Time will tell whether colleges and universities take the much larger, necessary steps to systematically change the campus environment and prevent such hate crimes from reaching national headlines again. Shepard's life will continue to affect many in our college communities and our nation. The haunting echo of his murder will be a reminder of the work that still needs to be done.

A campus model for reporting GLBT harassment can be found in the book Out on Fraternity Row: Personal Accounts of Being Gay in a College Fraternity edited by Shane L. Windmeyer and Pamela W. Freeman and published by Alyson Publications, 1998.

dent on the morning of Thursday, Oct. 8, following Shepard's discovery. Early that afternoon two phone calls were received informing Union staff of the specifics. The first call outlined the course of events surrounding Shepard's beating and the likely charges against Pasley as "accessory after the fact, attempted murder." A call from a committee member of the CAC's Safe Zone Program confirmed the sequence of events. This caller identified the victim as a gay student with membership in the LGBTA who was most likely victimized because of his sexual identity and said the injuries sustained in the beating were life threatening.

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

Late Thursday afternoon, the university called into action its Crisis Intervention Team, which is a standing team chaired by Hurst. Membership includes representatives from Housing and Residence Life, Counseling, campus police, University Relations, Minority Affairs, Student Life, and the vice president of administration and finance. But given the extensive nature of the circumstances, the team was expanded to include representatives from the city of Laramie, student government, LGBTA, CAC, and the vice president of academic affairs. The Crisis Intervention Team met daily to address the following issues: media management, rumor control, accurate information dissemination, coordination of appropriate programming, appropriate use of Homecoming events to acknowledge the tragedy, student involvement in managing the crisis, the role of faculty in classroom conversations, interactions with the Shepard family, requests for information and involvement from national and international levels, cooperation with the Laramie community, and how to acknowl-



Jim Osborn, president of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered Association, sits in front of one of many items of support sent to the Wyoming Union.

edge the grief and desire for involvement throughout the university and Laramie community.

By the way, it was Homecoming week

Shepard was attacked on Tuesday, Oct. 6, which also was the kickoff to Homecoming week. The CAC plays a significant role in planning Homecoming events and was deeply involved in the coordination of an array of activities at the time of the incident. Although the decision was made that Homecoming events would proceed, a difficult, awkward, and unsettled mood surrounded the week's activities.

On Friday, Oct. 9, the United Multicultural Council was determined to take action and make a statement. This group was not going to sit idly by as the rest of the world made judgments about the university, Laramie, and the state of Wyoming. The council developed the concept of the yellow armbands with green circles. The green circle is the international sign for peace. The yellow background was used in the tradition of the yellow ribbons distributed after the Oklahoma City bombing, symbolizing intolerance to violence. By 5 p.m. that afternoon, yellow armbands

were visible across campus tied to arms, backpacks, trees, light posts, and buildings. Working in conjunction with staff from the CAC, the university's Office of Minority Affairs, and other diverse student organizations, the Multicultural Resource Center produced and distributed the yellow and green armbands. The students at the resource center were a small, tireless army determined to respond to the attack of a member of the campus community. The armbands became visible that evening at Homecoming events, the first of which was the annual Homecoming Sing. Prior to entering the performance location, the United Multicultural Council requested that Sing participants wear the armbands. Fourteen student organizations ranging in size from 15 to 70 members prominently displayed the armbands to an audience of 1,900 students, staff, faculty, administrators, alumni, and campus visitors. The Sing coordinator, wearing a yellow armband, recognized the tragedy and its impact on the campus community by asking the audience to observe a moment of silence. It was a powerful and appropriate acknowledgment and response.

Rob Spaulding, an officer of the Associated Students of the University of Wyo-



Members of the University of Wyoming community adopted a green circle on a yellow field as a symbol of peace and their intolerance of violence. The football team displayed the symbol on its helmets, one of which sits on a quilt covered with messages of support.

ming, said at the Sing: "Today, I would encourage us to recognize this tragedy. One way to do so is to wear the yellow armband that you may have seen some administrators, faculty, staff, and students wearing. ... Please display this ribbon, anywhere and everywhere—as an armband, on your backpack, etc.—as a display of your intolerance of this disgusting, abhorrent act of incivility toward Matthew Shepard. We wear this armband in a unified, nonviolent demonstration of our values as UW students and the UW community against any and all acts of violence and disrespect toward any human being. The second way to recognize this tragedy would be to individually observe a moment of silence as we all stand in solidarity against prejudice and violence in all of its forms. And especially for the family of Matthew Shepard and all who are involved in this incident, that they may find comfort, hope, and the spirit of forgiveness."

Later that night, students preparing to march in the Homecoming parade on Saturday worked into the early morning hours to create as many armbands and banners as time and materials allowed. As a result of much determination and little sleep, hun-

On Sunday, Oct. 11, members of the Union staff participated in a five-hour Crisis Intervention Team meeting. University President Philip Dubois and Wyoming Gov. Jim Geringer were present for portions of this meeting. That evening, the first candlelight vigils were held at local churches.

dreds of armbands were passed out along Saturday's parade route.

The parade had its usual number of floats, bands, and elected officials. At the end of the parade behind a large yellow banner with three green circles about 50 individuals—students, faculty, staff, deans, vice presidents, members of City Council, and Laramie residents—joined the parade lineup. As the marchers passed through the streets of downtown Laramie respectful applause broke out, words of solidarity were heard, individuals were seen crying, and

spectators joined the group. At the conclusion of the parade the marchers had grown to an estimated 1,000. It was a moving experience for all involved.

Other Homecoming events on Saturday illustrated the impact the tragedy had on the campus community. Along fraternity/sorority mall a large banner said, "UW Greeks will remember Matthew Shepard." A moment of silence for Shepard was observed at the Homecoming football game. The university's athletic teams wore a yellow and green symbol supporting tolerance and diversity.

For members of the Union staff, Homecoming week concluded with a staff meeting Saturday, Oct. 10. The focus of the meeting was to coordinate Union staff efforts to address the crisis across campus and how to best serve students during the unfolding of events over the next week. Programming and media management issues were discussed along with the need to perform routine job duties even though the office environment was anything but normal.

A key issue of concern addressed at this meeting was the fact that Gay Awareness Week was planned for the following week. Staff questioned whether the activities should be rescheduled, but it was quickly realized LGBTQA should make that decision. Osborn shared that LGBTQA decided the observances would occur as planned to show that Shepard's aggressors were not successful in suppressing an entire community. Programs were evaluated in regard to safety issues, and necessary modifications were made. Osborn informed Union staff that the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force were arriving in Laramie to provide assistance with media management.

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'Remembering Matthew'

Monday morning, Oct. 12, brought news of Shepard's death. By 6 a.m., Osborn

called Union Director Bill Fruth at home to tell him the news. Fruth contacted CAC staff members to share this news and request they report to work by 7 a.m. to provide support and make preparations. Despite previous planning, no one was prepared to deal with the news of Shepard's death or the presence the press had on campus that day. It was easily the most difficult day the Union staff has ever worked.

It is impossible to describe the circumstances that quickly unfolded within a matter of a few hours. While the mood was somber, the CAC maintained a high level of activity. By 9 a.m. the CAC staff, in conjunction with student government and student organizations, developed and promoted a program titled "Remembering Matthew." The program was intended to allow the campus and Laramie community an opportunity to pause, reflect, and grieve. Throughout the day, hundreds of telephone calls, e-mails, and faxes were received expressing sympathy and support, but on occasion some were hate focused. Students continued to make and distribute armbands. Gay Awareness Week activities began. At dusk, an estimated 1,500 people gathered to participate in the "Remember Matthew" program on the main university mall. It was truly a community-building experience.

Student government President Jesus Rios said at "Remembering Matthew": "There is nothing wrong with being angry ... if we are not careful to be constructive with our anger, to make good of something bad, then we allow those who are hateful to win. ... Don't be afraid, ... Don't be hateful. Don't allow what has been done to close your heart."

By Tuesday evening, Oct. 13, the CAC staff met with student government and about 20 student organization leaders to develop a student-focused response that became a campus open forum titled "Hostility Bites!" Outside the Union, other university departments were working around the

clock as well. The faculty organized a number of teach-ins, which took place in the main university mall. In addition, the University Relations office replied to thousands of e-mail messages, media questions, and phone calls. An attempt was made to respond to all individuals who contacted the university during this crisis.

Throughout this day several valuable lessons were learned and a fair number of mistakes were made. The idea of doing any work in the CAC not directly dealing with Shepard's death was not feasible despite any planning or efforts to do so. Staff directly affected by the incident reacted in a variety of ways. Some were very involved, others tried to distract themselves emotionally from the unfolding events, while some tried to keep the day as normal as possible. It also became apparent that experiences of the CAC

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staff were not necessarily those of other Union staff or campus community members. CAC staff learned the importance of providing mutual support and communicating with one another. Communication was the key to survival. Although regular updates and briefings were held with CAC staff directly involved, in retrospect communication with all Union staff, tenants, and students should have been maintained. Nearly everyone who worked in the Union felt some connection to the tragedy and could have been more informed as to what was taking place within the building and on the campus.

The remainder of the week entailed working closely with students, staff, faculty, and the Laramie community

on a range of issues regarding the University response to Shepard's death. The Union's learning curve continued to expand. It became apparent that a number of student leaders considered colleagues within CAC had been overlooked and their work spaces taken over for the hectic preparations and meetings during the crisis. It was vital to re-establish those relationships and share the work spaces. As people continued to ask questions and request information, the staff learned the importance of asking their own questions, for example: Why was something needed? Who was offering assistance? What were the goals of those offering assistance? A firm understanding of boundaries was established for Union staff and students who did not wish to be interviewed since film crews from "20/20," "Dateline," and MTV and reporters from *People Magazine*, *USA Today*,

Time, and *Newsweek* were on campus throughout the week.

Shepard's funeral was Friday, Oct. 16, in Casper. Representatives from the university were present to show respect for Shepard's life, including President Dubois, Vice President Hurst, and student government officers. With Friday being a "fall break" day, many of the Union staff took the day off to take care of themselves. Touching and heart-wrenching cards, letters, and items such as banners signed by thousands of students from other colleges and universities had begun to arrive and be processed by CAC staff. The preceding weeks had taken a toll physically and emotionally.

In an effort to allow the community to communicate their thoughts and

feelings to the Shepard family, a book of condolences was placed in the Union for individuals to sign or leave messages to the Shepard family. By the time of the memorial service on Oct. 19, three books of remarks had been filled. One week after Shepard's death, the university held an emotional memorial service with more than 1,500 in attendance. Those attending wore yellow armbands passed out at the entry by Vice President Hurst, the Union staff, and student volunteers.

Although the memorial provided healing and a level of closure for many members of the community, the impact of Shepard's brutal death is still on the minds of many. As the case moves into the courts, the city, university, and Union continue to remain focal points for ongoing discussions about hate crimes.

"This tragedy has tested our endurance and our sense of community," said President Dubois in the Oct. 13 *Branding Iron*. "But instead of being torn apart by fear, we have been brought together in unity and in purpose. ... We must use Matt's example in life to work against hatred, bigotry, and violence. ... And we must continue to keep Matt Shepard and his family first in our minds and our hearts. Their courage in the face of tragedy should serve to guide us all in the difficult days ahead."

Lessons learned

Reviewing the events following Shepard's beating provides some insight as to what happened and the coping strategies employed with this tragic event. Dealing with a crisis of this nature is not something for which one can prepare. The following "critical lessons" and "reaffirmed beliefs" are an attempt to provide some understanding as to how one can anticipate and respond to campus crises.

Critical lessons

- Be prepared to deal with anyone and everything. One must keep an open mind and be able to deal with whatever comes up. Unfortunately, in addition to an outpouring of support, many negativists want to bestow their beliefs upon you.

- Communicate. It is the key to survival. Keeping appropriate constituencies apprised of updates and clarifying rumors and any other pertinent issues that arise are critical.
- Designate individuals to respond to phone calls, e-mail, and letters. The appropriate school liaison should inform these people immediately how and to whom they should respond. Having a designated point person ensures consistency in information dissemination.
- Have a plan for how you will deal with the media. Again, it is wise to have an individual appointed to serve as a spokesperson that will represent your department and organizations well. There are instances when the media will misrepresent the facts. Filtering information through one individual helps impede inaccurate information. Commit to providing accurate, succinct information.
- Keep students, faculty, and staff involved. This means keeping the lines of communication open to all individuals. Respect everyone's feelings and allow time for healing.
- Follow your humanistic instincts. If you are not certain you are able to respond appropriately, ask someone else who can. During crises, there is never enough time to plan your responses and actions. Have confidence in your ability to meet others' needs.
- Recognize there are circumstances when there is no "right" solution. When every option seems harmful, choose the option that best minimizes damage.
- Be aware of various students' needs and attend to them. If you cannot attend to a particular group at a given moment, provide an explanation as to why and set aside time to do so later. Key student groups cannot be ignored during a crisis. They need to keep functioning if they are not involved otherwise.
- Take care of *all* of your staff. It is easy to be caught up in the moment and forget there are others who may be im-

pacted by the crisis but are not necessarily showing it.

- Take care of yourself. You are needed, so take the time to care for yourself so you can be effective with others.
- Trust your staff. They were hired to do the job because they are competent. Allow them to demonstrate their strengths in times of crisis.
- Remember basic needs. Nobody can function effectively without food or sleep.
- Bend the rules if you need to. There are times when certain policies that hinder a process may need to be overlooked. Allow for flexibility.
- Maintain a sense of humor.

Reaffirmed beliefs

- President Dubois' visibility, honest emotion, and sense of compassion provided a clear role model for the campus and local community.
- It is critical to develop and maintain relationships with student leaders and student organizations.
- Although crisis management teams are used infrequently, it is critical that colleges and universities have such teams so mobilization can occur immediately when necessary.
- The Union staff values the university's Safe Zone Program. Safe Zone was established in 1996 by the CAC to promote a more positive campus climate for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender and questioning individuals. Establishment of this program had previously solidified the necessary relationships to deal with this particular crisis.
- The purpose, value, and strength of the Wyoming Union were reaffirmed. Nothing can fully prepare one for tragic events, nor can we prevent such acts. But we can try to prepare ourselves for whatever fallout occurs. It is reassuring to have a plan in place to allow students, faculty, and staff to perform optimally. However, as the Wyoming Union discovered one can never be prepared to deal with the overwhelming thoughts and emotions that accompany such a crisis.