

inTIME



In November 1998, ten New Yorkers set out for Laramie, Wyoming, to explore a town and a crime that occurred there.



Over the next year, they conducted interviews with more than 200 residents of Laramie. The result was a deeply moving play—and now a film—about bigotry and tolerance, fear and courage, hate and hope.



THE LARAMIE PROJECT

EVERYONE CARRIES A PIECE OF THE TRUTH.



The Laramie Project premieres on HBO on Saturday, March 9, 2002, at 8 PM / 7 c.



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LARAMIE, WYOMING: MIRROR OF A NATION

A brutal killing forces a small Wyoming town to search its soul—and challenges all Americans to confront an enduring hatred

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HAT PEOPLE MEAN when they say Matthew Shepard's murder was a lynching is that he was killed to make a point.

When he was 21 years old, Shepard was tied with rope, pistol-whipped and stretched along a Wyoming fence not just as a dying young man but as a signpost. "If we had our way," it says, "this is what we have in mind for gays."

With his beating on October 6, 1998, and his death six days later, Shepard ignited a national town meeting on the enduring hatred that shames this country—a hatred so intense that even death didn't save him from it. While Shepard lay in a coma at a hospital in nearby Colorado, college students there mocked him with a scarecrow atop a parade float. And while his parents prepared for his burial and spoke of their son's gentle ways, a Kansas minister made plans to mount a protest at Shepard's funeral.

To be sure, Wyoming has a strong record on certain human-rights issues: it's been known as "the Equality State" since 1870, when it became the first state to allow women to vote. But in Wyoming—and countless other places across the country, including schools, workplaces and the U.S. military—gay people often feel compelled to hide their identity rather than risk intimidation, ostracism or violence.

Jeff Korhonen, 27, can explain the situation as well as anyone else. He was raised in Cheyenne, his father a career military man, his mother a Mormon, his grandfather a minister.



STEVE LISB



Not until his early 20s did he tell his family that he is gay. "When I left Cheyenne for Laramie," he remembers, "my father said, 'I know you're very proud of who you are, but please watch yourself because there are people who will want to destroy you simply because of who you are.' I gave him a big hug and said, 'I know.'"

And then the first thing I saw when I got to Laramie was a bumper sticker that said HATRED IS A FAMILY VIRTUE."

State representative Mike Massie of Laramie understands the situation, too. Four times during the 1990s, Massie co-sponsored anti-bias bills in the Wyoming legislature; four times they died.

There's no problem with enhanced penalties for crimes against race, religion or ethnicity, he's been told by fellow lawmakers. But if he doesn't drop sexual orientation from the list, then there's not a chance of passage.

"I am so angry over the fact that it never passed," Massie explains, because now the

nation can wonder whether, "gee, maybe Wyoming tolerates this kind of thing." ■

• **Could an attack on a gay student like the one in Wyoming happen in your own community?**

YES 68%
NO 27%

• **Federal law mandates increased penalties for people who commit hate crimes against racial minorities. Do you favor or oppose the same treatment for people who commit hate crimes against homosexuals?**

Favor 76%
Oppose 19%

—FROM A TIME/CNN POLL

HOPE, HEART AND HATE

The people who inspired
The Laramie Project

"Matt's beating, hospitalization and funeral focused worldwide attention on hate. Good is coming out of evil."

—DENNIS SHEPARD,
MATTHEW SHEPARD'S
FATHER

MATTHEW SHEPARD was a 21-year-old student at the University of Wyoming in Laramie when a brutal attack transformed him into a national symbol. His death became a rallying point in the struggle for tolerance and against hate.

Raised in Casper, Wyoming, Shepard was a first-year political-science major with an interest in theater. His stated career ambition was to become a diplomat or to work in politics. Two days before the attack, Matthew told a friend that



he had joined the campus gay and lesbian group and was "enjoying it." An avid outdoorsman, he had a passion for camping, hunting, fishing and skiing.

JUDY and DENNIS SHEPARD spoke lovingly of their son's nature: "If this had happened to another person," said Dennis Shepard, "he would have been the first person to offer his help, his hope and his heart to the family."

STEVE LIS



RUSSELL HENDERSON and **AARON MCKINNEY**, the men convicted of killing Matthew Shepard, were almost the same age as their victim, 21 and 22, respectively. The two friends worked sporadically as roofers and had had a number of run-ins with the police. To explain why he attacked Shepard, McKinney attempted to use a "gay panic" defense, claiming that he was

provoked by an unwanted sexual advance. Judge Barton Voigt refused to allow this argument, and the jury subsequently found McKinney guilty. The judge left it to Shepard's parents to decide if McKinney should receive the death penalty. Speaking to the court, Dennis Shepard told McKinney: "I give you life in the memory of someone who no longer lives. May you have a long life, and may you thank Matthew every day for it." Both McKinney and Henderson are currently serving life sentences in Wyoming.

On October 7, 1998, **AARON KREIFELS** went for a mountain bike ride in a remote section of Laramie. Kreifels fell off his bicycle and stumbled across what looked like a scarecrow. The seemingly lifeless form turned out to be the seriously wounded body of Matthew Shepard. At that point, Shepard had been bound to the fence for 18 hours but was still alive, and Kreifels ran to get help. Raised as a Catholic, Kreifels had been taught that homosexuality is a sin; to his knowledge, he had never met a gay person prior to finding Shepard. While he continued to disagree with the "gay lifestyle," Kreifels also came to believe that God had intended him to ride by the fence so that Matthew Shepard would not have to die alone.

REGGIE FLUTY of the Albany County Sheriff's Office was the police officer who responded to the emergency call about Matthew Shepard. When Fluty arrived on the scene, Shepard was still bound tightly to the fence, and she had to cut through the ropes carefully in order to release him without causing additional injuries. Shepard was so badly hurt that Fluty could not open his mouth to perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Once Shepard had been



hospitalized, Fluty was informed that she had been exposed to the HIV virus. Fluty had cuts on her hands, and Shepard had tested positive for the virus. She began taking the drug AZT, which can have a preventive effect if taken immediately after exposure, and was eventually determined to be HIV-negative.

Though **ROMAINE PATTERSON** originally hoped to become a rock star, Matthew Shepard's death transformed her into an activist for tolerance. When Reverend Fred Phelps, Sr., staged an anti-gay protest at Shepard's funeral, waving placards reading "Matt in Hell," Patterson and her friends tried to drown out the taunts by surrounding the demonstrators and singing "Amazing Grace." Phelps returned to Laramie for the trials of Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. This time, Patterson's activists put on homemade angel costumes with large wings and surrounded the Phelps group, silencing the hateful demonstration. Afterwards, Patterson was often asked to speak about Matthew Shepard and her work to promote tolerance in Laramie and beyond.

ED ANDRESKI/AP



"We are a group of people bringing forth a message of peace and love and compassion."

—ROMAINE
PATTERSON

Roman Catholic priest **ROGER SCHMIT** was galvanized by the attack on Matthew Shepard and immediately took a stand against hate crimes and hate speech. Father Schmit insisted that his church be part of the community vigil for Matthew Shepard. Later, he worked as a spiritual counselor to Aaron McKinney, hoping to prevent the death penalty for McKinney. Schmit asked that society learn from the crime of McKinney and Henderson, and challenged all citizens to reflect on how these two young men had learned hate instead of love.

ED ANDRESKI/AP





FROM LIFE TO TV: THE POWER OF VOICES

Hundreds of interviews form the basis for a play and film that chronicle a town's reaction to a killing

A month after the murder of Matthew Shepard, the frenzied media coverage of this brutal hate crime was beginning to subside. But just then the beleaguered town of Laramie got another influx of visitors. They were actors from New York City who had cast themselves in new roles: as reporters. With tape recorders in hand—and working in pairs at first, in case there was any trouble—they fanned out across the community to interview people affected by the crime: the bartender who saw Matt Shepard leave with the two men later convicted of his murder, the emergency-room doctor who treated Shepard, college officials, religious leaders, police officers, ranchers, friends.

The actors talked to more than 200 people and amassed some 400 hours of interviews over the next year and a half.

Verbatim excerpts from those interviews make up the text for *The Laramie Project*, an unusual mixture of drama and documentary. “It brought a whole new focus on events,” says Wyoming reporter Tiffany Edwards, who choked back tears on the play’s opening night in Denver. “That’s the difference between theater and journalism.”



ON THE SET: These photos, from *The Laramie Project* film, were shot on location in Wyoming. The film depicts Laramie residents standing up to hate in vigils (top) and parades (left), while following a group of actors (center) who went to Laramie to see how Shepard’s death changed the town.

To find out more about *The Laramie Project*, visit www.hbo.com/films

WINNING A COMMUNITY'S TRUST

"The idea for *The Laramie Project*," explains **MOISES KAUFMAN**, "originated out of my desire to learn more about why Matthew Shepard was murdered; about what happened that night; about the town of Laramie. The idea of listening to the citizens talk really interested me. How is Laramie different from the rest of the country and how is it similar?"

The Venezuelan-born playwright and director saw a "watershed" contemporary event and enlisted members of his Tectonic Theater Project to help develop a stage work—and later a film—from it.

The actors found the townspeople wary of the media yet surprisingly willing to talk. "What helped was that we were clearly not experts and were groping our way," says company member Greg Pierotti, who traveled to Laramie with Kaufman. The interviewees won the community's trust: Kaufman even helped a woman move furniture when she was evicted from her low-income home.

"The experience of working on *The Laramie Project* has been one of great sadness, great beauty, and, perhaps most important, great revelations—about our nation, about our ideas, about ourselves."

—MOISES KAUFMAN, CREATOR OF *THE LARAMIE PROJECT*



CREATING A CULTURAL X-RAY

inTIME spoke with director Moises Kaufman to learn why he embarked on *The Laramie Project*—and how he hopes his film will inspire viewers.

Q: Why do you think Matthew Shepard's murder attracted so much attention?

KAUFMAN: Matthew was a young student with his life ahead of him. We could all identify with him and say, "My God, they stopped his life at the most beautiful moment of it. He could be everybody's brother. He could be everybody's friend." There was also the symbolic nature of the crime: it was a crucifixion. You can't do that in our culture without getting an incredible amount of attention.

Q: What did you hope to achieve by going to Laramie?

KAUFMAN: I've always talked about this as going to "Ground Zero." Those words now take on a very different meaning. But my idea was that if we went to Laramie and interviewed the people of the town, we might be able to create a document that was an X-ray not only of how Laramie was feeling at the end of the millennium, but about how the country was feeling and thinking and talking—about violence, class, education, sexual politics, privileges and rights.

Q: What do you hope students will take away from viewing this film?

KAUFMAN: Most importantly, *The Laramie Project* tries to put us in touch with our common humanity. Past the issues, past the ideas, it tries to focus attention on how we are all different and how we are all the same. When Matthew's murder happened, the students at the high school in Laramie were really shaken by it. And I think this is an opportunity for students all around the country to meditate on what that meant, and on how they can take steps to prevent another Matthew Shepard from being murdered in their communities and in their schools.

There's a line in the film where Father Roger Schmit says that every time someone is called a "fag" or a "dyke," that is the seed of violence. It would be interesting for students to look around their school environment and ask, Where are the seeds of violence here? In *The Laramie Project*, people ask: What is a community? And what are the values that guide a community? Those are great questions for students to think about.



SEEKING JUSTICE: In a dramatic courtroom scene, the prosecutor plays a tape recording in which Aaron McKinney confesses to beating Shepard.



ANGEL ACTION: Romaine Patterson (right) and fellow student activists countered anti-gay protesters by dressing as angels and surrounding them. Costume designers for *The Laramie Project* re-created this moment for inclusion in the film (above).

ED ANDRISK/AP





BEYOND LARAMIE: ROOTS OF INTOLERANCE

Despite America's promise of freedom for all, citizens have faced persecution for being different. Six case studies shed light on the deep-seated causes of bigotry, violence and hatred

During the American Revolution, Colonel Charles Lynch—a fierce patriot—yearned to punish his fellow Virginians who were disloyal to the cause of independence. Lynch set up his own court, named himself its judge, and announced that suspects found guilty of supporting the British would be whipped under a tree in his yard. “Lynching”—in which a mob takes the law into its own hands to injure or kill a person accused of wrongdoing—became increasingly common as the nation expanded.

Between 1882, when reliable statistics were first collected, and 1968, 4,743 persons died of lynching; 3,446 of them were black men and women. Onlookers often cheered and children played during lynchings; pieces of the corpse were sometimes taken as souvenirs of the event.

American history is filled with countless stories of prejudice against

groups and individuals because of their political beliefs, race, religion, gender, national origin, sexual orientation or other differences. These stories are unsettling, but examining them can illuminate the causes of bigotry—as well as steps individual citizens can take to help America live up to its promise of liberty and justice for all.

1 JAMES BYRD: DEATH BY DRAGGING

Four months before the murder of Matthew Shepard, the small logging town of Jasper, Texas, was itself transformed by a vicious hate crime. James Byrd, a 49-year-old African-American resident, was killed by three white men who shackled him to the back of a pickup truck and dragged him for several miles. Pathologists believe Byrd was still alive and conscious for the first two miles, until the truck hit a concrete drainage ditch, instantly killing Byrd and severing his head, upper torso and right arm from the rest of his body. White supremacist roommates John William King, 24, and Lawrence Russell Brewer, 32, were sentenced to death in their 1999 trials. Both were members of the Confederate Knights of America, a faction of the Ku Klux Klan.

2 JAPANESE AMERICANS: SUSPECTED OF TREASON

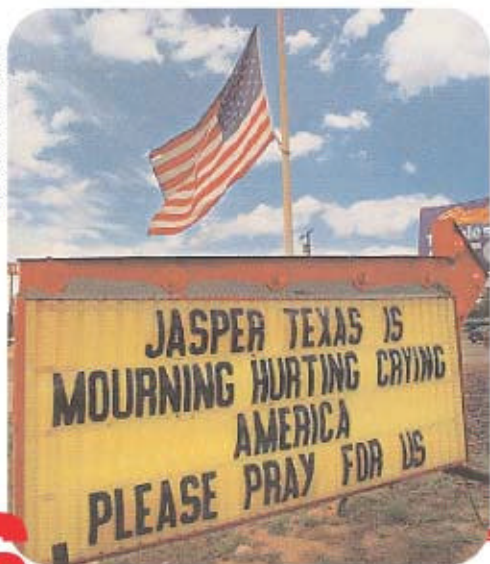
In response to Japan's 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. government decided to detain approximately

120,000 Japanese Americans in camps throughout the Western states. Although no Japanese American was ever convicted of spying for Japan during World War II, these American citizens and naturalized Japanese immigrants were removed from their homes, under suspicion of disloyalty or treason against the U.S. Families were forced to leave their communities quickly, often selling houses and businesses for a fraction of their worth before being taken to remote camps in deserts and other harsh environments. Ironically, many of those interned were later drafted into the U.S. armed forces and sent overseas to fight for the government that had imprisoned them.

3 ANTI-SEMITISM: THE TARGETING OF JEWISH AMERICANS

In August 1999, Buford Furrow, Jr. walked into a Jewish Community Center in Los Angeles and shot five people, including four children, three of them under seven. Furrow, a member of the white supremacist group Aryan Nations, told law-enforcement officials that his shooting spree was “a wake-up call to America to kill Jews.”

Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Center of Los Angeles, which monitors hate crimes and hate groups, says that Jews are disproportionately singled out as targets for hate crimes, particularly in California. In 2000, for example, anti-Semitic acts represented 12



GREG SMITH/CORBIS SYGMA

percent of hate crimes in the state, while Jews make up only three percent of the population.

4 INTOLERANCE ON THE WEB: THE RISE OF DIGITAL HATE

There are now more than 3,000 hate sites on the Web, notes Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Center (www.wiesenthal.com), which



EVACUATED: FDR ordered Japanese Americans into detention camps.

tracks white supremacists and other hate groups that use the Internet to spread messages of intolerance. "These are multipurpose hate organizations," says Cooper. "They are anti-Jewish, anti-immigrant, anti-minority and, some would argue, anti-American." Combatting hate on the Web can be difficult, particularly because some hate groups use misleading tactics. For example, www.martinlutherking.org is a site created by people who hate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his message of justice. But unsuspecting Web surfers would assume the site is dedicated to the values or memory of Dr. King, when in fact it promotes racism and anti-Semitism. For more resources on countering digital hate, visit www.hbo.com/hate.

5 CAMPUS VIOLENCE: COLUMBINE AND BEYOND

Five years ago, Evan Ramsey brought a pump-action shotgun to his Alaska high school and opened up, killing the principal and one student. Now he is serving a 210-year term in a maximum-security prison in the Alaskan mountains. Every night, before crashing in the tiny cell he shares with a fellow murderer, he mops the prison floors, a job that earns him \$21 a month, just enough to buy soap, shampoo and stationery.

Ramsey says he committed his rampage because he was sick of being picked on in school. "Nobody liked me, and I could never understand why," he says. "It was pretty bad then, but it's a lot worse now. I sit there, and I wish, I wish, I wish, I wish I didn't do what I did."

Following the Columbine massacre of 1999—in which two students opened fire in a Colorado high school, killing 13 people and then themselves—a blue-ribbon panel criticized police, school officials and parents for not intervening after being given signs of the killers' murderous intent. "That would have been one of the best things a person could have done," says Ramsey of his own case. Adds Ronald Stephens of the National School Safety Center: "The best metal detector is the student." That's because in more than 75 percent of school-violence incidents, the attacker tells someone before resorting to violence.

6 MUSLIM AMERICANS: IN THE LINE OF FIRE AFTER 9/11

Following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, hate crimes against Muslims, Arab Americans, Sikhs and others



TINA FINEBERG/AP

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

We all grow up with prejudices. It takes effort to see them as clearly as others do. Human-rights experts recommend starting with our speech and thought patterns. Am I quick to label "rednecks" or "liberals"? Do I tell gay jokes? Am I careless with gender descriptions?

Here are some other questions you may ask yourself: How wide is my circle of friends? How diverse is my holiday card list? How integrated is my neighborhood? Why is that? Do I belong to private clubs that exclude? How often am I in the minority? Do I have the courage to ask a friend not to tell a sexist joke in my presence? How can I go out of my way to know people who appear different?

SOURCE: TOLERANCE.ORG

who appeared to be Muslim skyrocketed. In the two weeks after Sept. 11, the Council on American-Islamic Relations documented more than 600 anti-Arab and anti-Muslim incidents in the U.S., including four murders, assaults on 45 individuals, and attacks on 60 mosques. Many South Asian Americans and Arab Americans were afraid to go out in public for fear of violence, name-calling or other harassment based solely on appearance. Congressman John Cooksey of Louisiana told a radio program that "if I see someone that's got a diaper on

his head, that guy needs to be pulled over." (He later apologized.) And in a CNN poll, 49% of adults said that all Arabs—including American citizens—should be required to carry special ID cards. ■

