# Matthew Shepard

October 12, 2008 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Ten years ago today, Matthew Shepard died after spending days in a coma. He had been brutally beaten by two men near Laramie, Wyoming, and tied to a fence for 18 hours left alone to die. As punishment for felony murder and kidnapping, those men are each serving two consecutive life sentences in prison. His murder was classified as a hate crime. Matthew was gay.

His murder became a sad but powerful touchstone in the fight for equal rights for LGBTs. Judy Shepard, his mother, founded the Matthew Shepard Foundation to combat hatred and promote LGBT equality.

His story inspired the stage and film versions of The Laramie Project; the TV movie The Matthew Shepard Story; the documentary Laramie Inside Out; and numerous pop songs in his memory. A federal hate crimes bill inclusive of LGBTs, The Matthew Shepard Act, was introduced in Congress last year but has yet to be passed.

Some LGBT activists claim that the amount of media surrounding his murder was due in part to Matthew being white, not unlike the heavy coverage of some murders of white women. Perhaps there's some truth to that claim.

There are many murders of black and Latino LGBTs, for example, that have been ignored by the traditional media, such as Gwen Araujo (a transgender Latina teen from California), Sakia Gunn (a lesbian African-American teen in New Jersey) and J.R. Warren (a gay African-American young man in West Virginia)?and these murders at least received some media coverage. The examples are countless.

The ABC TV news magazine 20/20 in 2004 reported many controversial claims about Matthew's murder, including that it was primarily motivated by robbery and not homophobia. The program also claimed that Matthew might have been HIV positive. These claims were made by highly questionable sources?and they don't change the awful facts of his murder.

Hate was a significant component of this crime, regardless of the supposed robbery motive. Whether he was HIV-positive or not, Matthew didn't deserve to die the way he did.

What's undeniable is that picket signs such as "AIDS Kills Fags Dead" and "God Hates Fags" were displayed at Matthew's funeral by protesters led by the infamous anti-gay minister Fred Phelps. For Phelps and people like him, the stigma against LGBTs was indistinguishable from HIV/AIDS stigma. It saddens me that little in that regard has changed.

I had the honor of hearing Judy speak in person earlier this year. She recounted what she and her family had suffered during the days from Matthew's beating to his death and the events that transpired soon thereafter. I couldn't hold back the tears, but I wasn't alone?there wasn't a dry eye in the entire

audience.

Matthew’s murder was a tragedy for both his family and our nation. I hope that Congress will pass The Matthew Shepard Act next year.

Watch a trailer for The Laramie Project?it summarizes the aftermath of Matthew’s murder:

Click here to read “Epilogue to Murder” by Patrick Healy, an article from The New York Times that recounts what the creators of “The Laramie Project” discovered when they visited Laramie 10 years later.

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