

By JEREMY ALLEN THOMPSON

Laramie.

Five years ago, I suspect, very few of us recognized the name of this small, Wyoming town. Today, few of us don't have some sort of visceral response to its mention. It evokes images of adults and children grasping signs of hate; of a young man, beaten and alone on a desolate prairie; of a town in shock, grappling with violence it didn't think possible. Of a community changed.

"If you would have asked me before," says a young Laramie man, "I would have told you Laramie is a beautiful town...with a strong sense of community. A town with a personality that most larger cities are stripped of. Now, I would say that Laramie is a town defined by an accident, a crime. We've become Waco. We've become Jasper. We're a noun, a definition, a sign."

The Laramie Project is the story of a town. Through the eyes of its residents, we explore its history, its humor, its life – and the vast effect of a crime that has changed it forever.

As we approach our production here at the UVM Theatre, we are exploring Laramie as a town that might as easily have been Burlington, St. Albans, or Plattsburgh. "It's a story about the nature and fabric of relationships and how people who are different can live together in a community," said Director Peter Jack Tkatch.

While now it is impossible to separate Laramie from Matthew Shepard, Tkatch is interested in approaching the UVM Theatre production by looking at diversity among the people of the town, rather than solely exploring crimes of hate against the LGBT community. He and a cast of eight University of Vermont students will paint a picture of the individual characters that make up Laramie and the town's unique culture.

In conjunction with the play, the theatre will be hosting two panel

discussions about diversity within our community, crimes that it motivates, and the actions that have been taken to address them. Moderated by Tkatch, the panel includes B.J. Rogers, Director of Outright Vermont; Captain Lianne Toumey of the UVM Police; and Sherwood Smith of the Center for Cultural Pluralism on the UVM campus. The panel discussions will be held following the performances on Thursday, September 27 and Saturday, October 6.

Plans are also underway to offer an informal forum for discussion following each of the performances. These forums will provide audiences the chance to relax with friends following the play and to discuss their views about issues that the performance has raised.

The Laramie Project, produced by the UVM Theatre, runs September 26 through October 7 at the Royall Tyler Theatre on the university cam-

pus. Performances are Wednesday through Saturday at 7:30 p.m. with a Sunday matinee on October 7 at 2 p.m. Ticket prices range from \$9 to \$12.50. For tickets or more information, call the UVM Theatre ticket office at 802-656-2094.

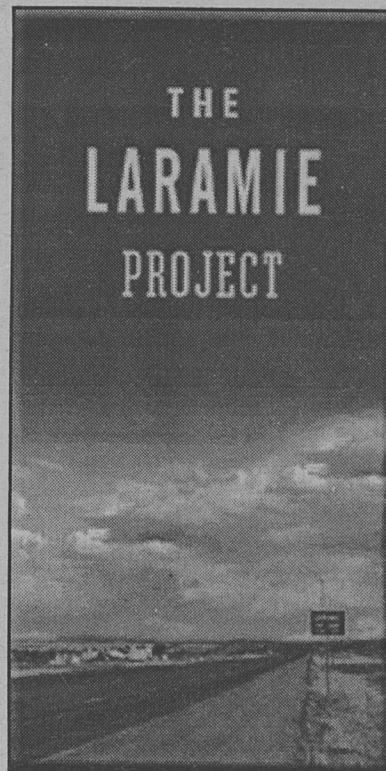
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