

Who Was Matthew Shepard?

(An excerpt from a speech delivered during the vigil in Washington, DC on October 14, by Walter Boulden, a close friend of Shepard's.)

I stand before you, not as a representative of any organization, profession, or group. I stand before you as a gay man, a parent,

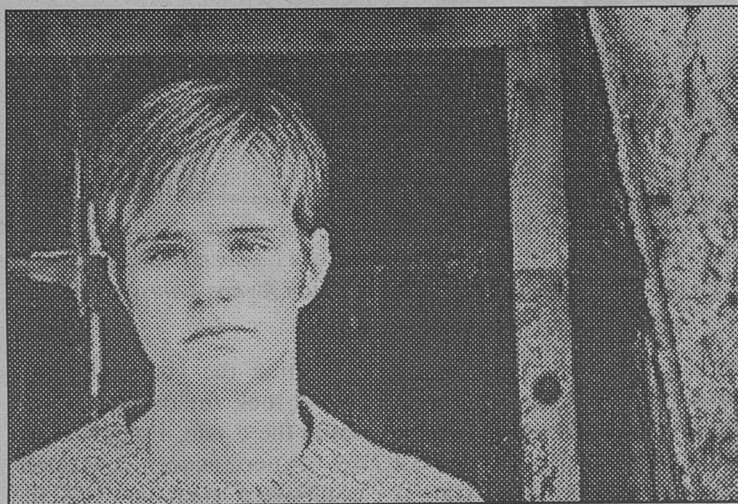
a neighbor, and a third generation native son of Wyoming, the equality state. But more importantly, Alex and I stand before you as friends of Matt Shepard.

Alex and I have been asked repeatedly to help people understand who Matt was. I sat for over an hour, looking at this blank paper, afraid to put my pen to it, a multitude of random images flashing through my mind, images and memories of Matt. It has taken several days for the shock to wear thin, and for the images of Matt to fight their way past the horrible image of his broken and battered body lying in that hospital bed. But Matt has made it back into my consciousness, past the horror, the shock, and the exhaustion.

His smile dances before my eyes as I write. All those who were graced with the gift of knowing Matt, know the smile I am talking about. Matt never smiled with just his mouth. His whole face and body would light up. His eyes would dance and his vibrancy and energy just radiated from his whole being.

It never mattered where we were, when I would meet Matt, he would bounce up to me, throw his arms around me in a hug only Matt could give, and immediately start into some conversation that would quickly suck me in. And we were lost in whatever topic was on his mind when we bumped into each other.

His insight, humor, and concern, all poured out, regardless of whether we were talking about world affairs, a class, a friend, or clothes and fashion. Throughout the conversation, Matt would pause, assume a very introspective posture, and take a draw from his cigarette, always careful to blow the smoke away from any-



one sitting near. And I'd have to smile. It was at this moment that I'd see all the care that Matt put into his appearance, the way his hair looked the way his clothes reflected his mood, the way he was sitting.

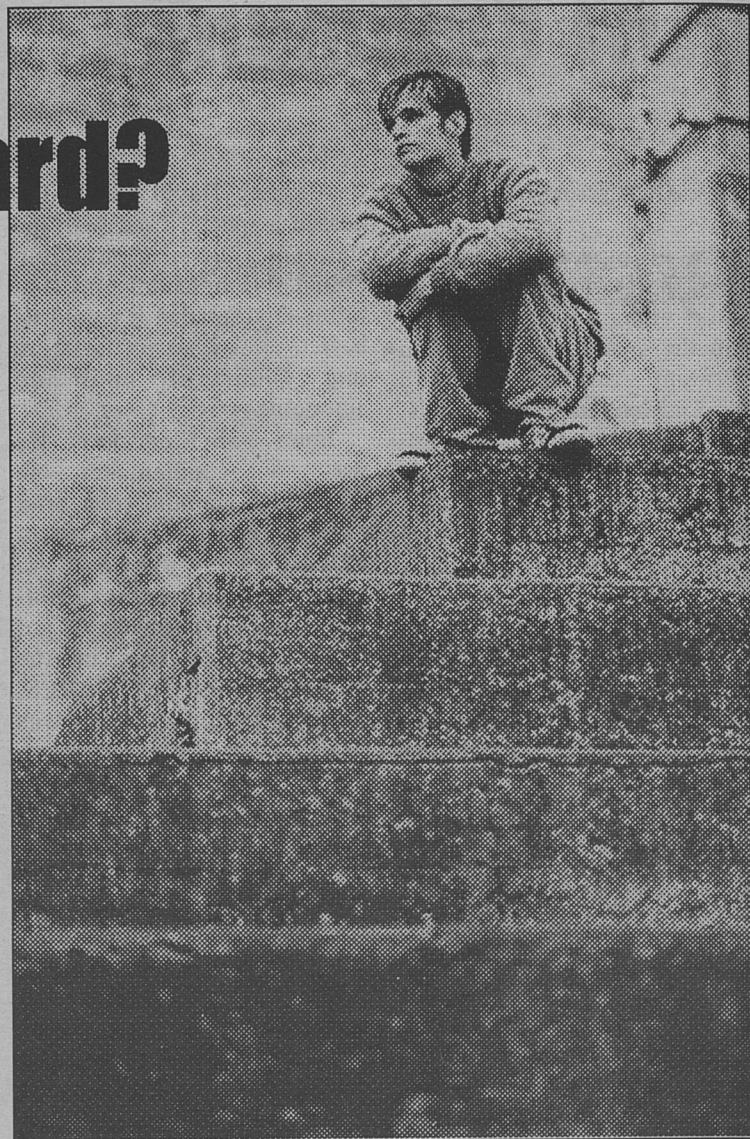
I might point that out, and we would laugh and talk about presentation and fashion and wanting people to have a favorable first impression. Matt wanted people to know him and like him at a level far deeper than the superficial "small-talk" "stage," but believed people judge each other with first impressions. Matt would be appalled that we are standing here in our everyday clothes instead of brand new suits.

When I say, Matt would bounce up to me, the image is crystal clear. Again, anyone who knew Matt knows what his "bounce" was like. We would talk and laugh about the way he walked. I'd remind him that he once told me he used to practice the way he walked, we'd laugh. He told me that his African American friend would tell him he walks "like a brother." Again, we'd laugh. Matt was very proud of that compliment. I'd tell him

he was so skinny because he used up too much energy with his "bounce."

But there are other images that also present themselves. Matt showing up at my door, and asking "Am I bothering you?" His eyes were not dancing, and he was not offering his energetic hug. His eyes had the look of a little boy who has just seen a scary movie. He'd come in and ask if he could "just hang." He'd have his backpack and school books with him. He'd either sit and watch TV for a little while, or take his books out and start doing homework.

After a short time he'd start talking about hearing someone call out "faggot," or hearing someone talk about "queers." We'd talk about how this touched Matt at the core of his heart, and that he needed to feel safe again. Then he'd just hang around, regrouping, and trying to harden himself. Something that never came easy for Matt, because he was not the type of person to "be hard." After some time, the Matt with the dancing eyes would start coming back and he'd be off to class or to meet a friend for coffee. ▼



Log Cabin Calls For Death Penalty For Murderers Of Matthew Shepard

GAY

The nation's largest gay Republican organization condemned the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard, a 21 year-old gay student in Laramie, Wyoming, and called on prosecutors to seek the death penalty under current Wyoming law for the suspects who have been charged with the crime.

"Brutality of this kind is intolerable, indefensible and deserving of the most severe punishment," says gay GOP Group.

GOP

"This was an incomprehensible act of brutality against an innocent and defenseless person," said Richard Tafel, executive director of Log Cabin Republicans. "From the evidence, it is clear that anti-gay hatred was a factor in this crime, but the sheer savagery of the murder of Matthew Shepard is of such a magnitude that there should be no question but to seek the most severe punishment available under the laws of Wyoming — the death penalty. Society must send the strongest message that brutality of this kind is intolerable, indefensible and deserving of the most severe punishment." ▼

V T P R I D E N E T > >

The VTPRIDENET email discussion list served as a sounding board for many of us needing to share our feelings about this tragedy. Below are some of the contributions to the discussion.

■ It has been on my mind since it happened. No personal fear I must admit, but deep concern for Matthew. As a Christian, I have kept him in my prayers. I'm thankful they have the guilty people in custody and I realize, along with

my horror, that heinous crimes such as this often serve to awaken the straight world to our cause. Even the President had a reaction!

Perhaps I am in the fortunate minority, but I have never, as an adult anyway (my childhood was something else again) been physically threatened or called names or anything like it. I have been as out as a person can be for at least the last 12 years. I have pink triangles and rainbow stickers everywhere. I try to tell everyone

I meet within the first few minutes of conversation. But then again, Burlington is like another world to those of us in the really small rural towns.

■ Vermont is, in so many ways, an insular environment. I am not criticizing...I choose to live here too. It is relatively safe to be pretty "out" and so hearing about things like the hate crime in Wyoming are particularly shocking to me living here.

As a Witch and a Pagan I too have held Matthew in prayer and been sending energy. I am sure many many people all over this country and perhaps the world are doing so too. He is, at the moment, a focal point. The 4 young people who perpetrated this crime are also focal points. I have found my anger towards them to be more than I am comfortable with...I view people who do these things as deeply ill, and so I wish for their healing as well as Matthews.

The Xtian Right will (is already attempting to) portray itself as sympathetic to Matthew but make no mistake about it, this is, in part, a result of the hate mongering that they practice. It is laudable that national figures like the President and the Minority Leader of the House of Representatives have made public statements about the need for Hate Crime Legislation.

Right here in our insular Vermont there is a Xtian Right movement that hates us and wants