



In my life, I have never known direct fear or threat due to my color. Having lived 34 years in the South, I suppose that I am very lucky. I have heard the words nigger and colored, words that hurt very deeply, more often than I care to remember. As I drove home from the plant only days after I arrived to work in Texarkana, I was greeted by a KKK rally on a clearing near a busy intersection. That hurt, too. But as an African-American, I have a community. No matter how far from home I venture, no matter how small the town, there is a community, ready to accept me, to understand, to stand by me. A community that's open and familiar and varied — ministers, businessmen, teachers, cab drivers, postmen, barbers — all readily identifiable. That community provides me a ghetto to feel safe and protected, to feel at home, even if only briefly, even if only until I return to work or walk the streets downtown or stop in for a meal at a diner. And then, I'm not afraid, I am aware.

In the towns where I have lived, there are no open communities for gays. We quietly seek each other out in bars far from home, on the internet, and in the personals of brown paper covered magazines and newspapers. We dare not speak out. Our ghettos are our homes with drapes drawn and doors latched. Good fences make

## Stand Together or Martyr Alone

*The kind, gentle, all-knowing middle America middle class would be outraged if the word Jew replaced the word Gay. Or would they?*

good ghettos. The Human Rights Campaign doesn't know that we exist — God's speed Chris Moes — until we are murdered. And for us, they don't exist.

I cried when I learned of Matthew Shepard's death. I cried because he's only one of hundreds, maybe more, who

are brutalized in small towns for being the very thing this country exalts us all to be: who we are, free to choose, free to pursue happiness. The martyred are known only to their loved ones. Their murders go unresolved and hardly noticed. This country of apes and hypocrites: "Gays are too wealthy to need laws to protect them against discrimination." "There are already laws on the books to punish assault." It's all bullshit and lies. The kind, gentle, all-knowing middle America middle class would be outraged if the word Jew replaced the word Gay. Or would they?

Vermont has a strong hate crimes law that covers sexual preference and orientation. On the Monday morning that I learned of Mr. Shepard's death, I wrote letters to Senators Leahy and Jeffords, and to Congressman Sanders. I also wrote to Rahm Emanuel at the White House. There must be national legislation. We have to stand up and be counted. Stand alone and risk becoming a martyr, unresolved and hard-

ly noticed.

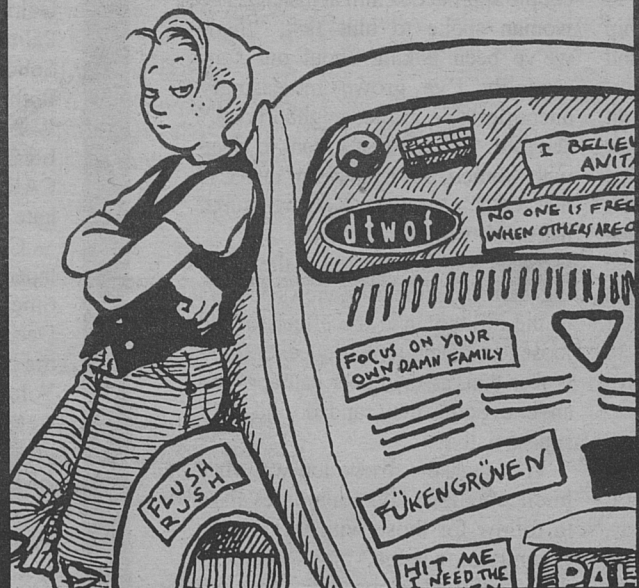
Pardon me. Now that we have stood together, I must return to my ghetto. I have to draw close the drapes and latch the door. ▼

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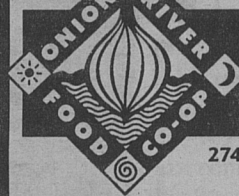


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