

# MATTHEW SHEPARD

b. December 1, 1976

d. October 12, 1998

## HERO

*“Every American child deserves the strongest protections from some of the country’s most horrifying crimes.” – Judy Shepard*

**Matthew Shepard’s high-profile murder case sparked protests, vigils and calls for federal hate crimes legislation for GLBT victims of violence.**

As a gay college student, Matthew Shepard was the victim of a deadly hate crime. His murder brought national and international attention to the need for GLBT-inclusive hate crimes legislation.

Shepard was born in Casper, Wyoming, to Judy and Dennis Shepard. He was the older of two sons. Matthew completed high school at The American School in Switzerland, and in 1998, he enrolled at the University of Wyoming in Laramie. Soon afterward, he joined the campus gay alliance.

On October 6, 1998, two men—Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson—lured Shepard from a downtown Laramie bar. After Shepard acknowledged that he was gay, McKinney and Henderson beat and tortured him, then tied him to a fence in a remote, rural area and left him for dead. Eighteen hours later, a biker, who thought he saw a scarecrow, found Shepard barely breathing.

Shepard was rushed to the hospital, but never regained consciousness. He died on October 12. Both of Shepard’s killers were convicted of felony murder and are serving two consecutive life sentences.

Despite the outcome of the trial, the men who took Shepard’s life were not charged with a hate crime. Wyoming has no hate crimes law, which protects victims of crimes motivated by bias against a protected class. Shepard’s high-profile murder case sparked protests, vigils and calls for federal hate crimes legislation for GLBT victims of violence.

Shortly after their son’s death, Judy and Dennis Shepard founded The Matthew Shepard Foundation to honor his memory and to “replace hate with understanding, compassion, and acceptance.” Judy Shepard became a GLBT activist and the most recognized voice in the fight for a federal hate crimes bill.

In 2009, more than a decade after Shepard’s murder, The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act (HCPA) was signed into law. HCPA added sexual orientation and gender identity to the list of protected classes, giving the United States Department of Justice the power to investigate and prosecute bias-motivated violent crimes against GLBT victims.

Dozens of songs have been written and recorded to honor Matthew Shepard’s legacy. Several films, television movies and plays about him have been produced, including “The Laramie Project” (2002) and “The Matthew Shepard Story” (2002).

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