

The Matthew Sheppard Story

Here is PEOPLE's original story on Shepard's brutal murder, published on Nov. 2, 1998, which honors his life and points forward to the fact that his death would not be in vain.

It was not the sort of funeral people are accustomed to in the prairie town of Casper, Wyoming, or, for that matter, anywhere else. Some 400 mourners overflowed the pews of St. Mark's Episcopal Church, while 500 more listened on speakers in adjoining rooms and in a Presbyterian church next door, and uncounted others tuned in on the radio. And then there were the protesters — more than a dozen flew in from Kansas and Texas—standing outside in the season's first snowfall, one holding a hand-scrawled placard reading God Hates Fags.

Judy and Dennis Shepard had appealed publicly for a “peaceful, dignified” service for their son Matthew, 21, a slight, 5-foot-2 college student who had met his grisly fate, police say, at the hands of two young men who brutally beat him, tied him to a fence and left him for dead, at least in part because he happened to be gay. By the time of his Oct. 16 funeral, Matthew had become something more than his parents' son, a martyr whose slaying served as a brutal reminder of the human capacity for hatred and violence. “For a small person, Matt had great personal presence,” his cousin's wife, Anne Kitch, a Poughkeepsie, New York, Episcopal priest, told the congregation of the 115-lb. Shepard. “He struggled to fit into a world that is not always kind to gentle spirits.”

Certainly it wasn't kind to him. Late on Tuesday evening, Oct. 6, he had stopped at a Laramie bar called the Fireside Lounge, near the University of Wyoming, where he had just begun his freshman year. Having failed to enlist some schoolmates to join him, he found himself in conversation with Russell

Henderson and Aaron McKinney, both 21 and high school dropouts, who were sharing a pitcher of beer. After Shepard confided that he was gay, police say, the two men lured him outside and into McKinney's father's truck.

Then things turned ugly. Police say Shepard was beaten with the butt of a .357 Magnum pistol as they drove to a remote bluff east of town, where they tied Shepard to a buck fence and, as he pleaded for his life, bludgeoned him, stole his wallet and black patent-leather shoes and left him for dead. Some 18 hours later, UW freshman Aaron Kreifels took a spill on his mountain bike outside of town. Standing up, he saw what he thought was a scarecrow hanging on a fence — until he noticed the human hair. “I realized, ‘Oh, my God, it’s a person!’ ” recalls Kreifels. Hospitalized in Fort Collins, Colorado, Shepard died five days later from his head injuries.

The older son of oil-company employee Dennis Shepard and his wife, Judy, Matthew, born prematurely, had always been small for his age. But at age 5, growing up in Casper, he found confidence while acting in community theater. “He was much older than he looked, so that gave him depth,” says Brenda Simpson, 46, who led a local theater program. And he had an infectious enthusiasm. “He was so bubbly,” says Leo Sanchez, 63, who taught Shepard history in junior high. “He literally used to bounce down the hallway.”

Matthew had just completed his sophomore year in high school when his parents relocated to Saudi Arabia, where his father worked as an oil-rig inspector, and enrolled him at a boarding school in Lugano, Switzerland. It was there, newly independent, that he began coming to terms with his homosexuality, friends say. After stays at North Carolina's Catawba College and Casper College in Wyoming, he moved in the spring of 1997 to Denver, where he worked selling vitamins by telephone. “He was always looking for a

place to kind of set his roots,” says his friend Romaine Patterson, 20, who works in a Denver coffee shop. “He wanted a place to call home.”

Ultimately, that impulse brought him back in June to his home state, where he enrolled for the fall semester at his father’s alma mater, the University of Wyoming. He was majoring in political science, and friends say he hoped to pursue a public service career, perhaps working for human rights causes. In Laramie, Shepard also found acceptance in a group called the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendering Association, whose meeting he attended on Oct. 6, the last night of his life. After a session to plan for Gay Awareness Week — just five days away — he went to dinner with four women from the group, but couldn’t persuade anyone to join him for a beer. “We were all so tired and didn’t want to go for drinks on a school night,” says Meesha Fenimore, 18, the group’s secretary.

Bartender Matt Galloway remembers Shepard arriving around 10:30 that night and ordering a Heineken. “He was definitely a shy kid,” says Galloway, 23, a UW senior, who recalls seeing Shepard at the bar on several earlier occasions. “He was just here to have a beer and kick back.” Around midnight, Henderson and McKinney stepped to the bar and asked for a pitcher of beer, then ponied together the \$5.50, mostly in dimes.

It remains a mystery, particularly to his friends, why the neatly dressed Shepard would have hooked up with the two men, whom Galloway described as looking “grungy.” Perhaps it was just youthful naiveté. Says Romaine Patterson: “He went to meet anyone thinking, ‘This is a good person. This is someone worth meeting.’”

At one time, that optimistic description might have fit Russell Henderson, a former Eagle Scout who had once been an honor roll student at Laramie Junior

High. But his parents split up when he was young; he dropped out of high school and took to working as a gas station attendant and roofer. Known as polite and considerate, Henderson frequently pitched in to help his grandmother, who runs a home daycare center. “Russell’s about the most American kid you can get,” says Carson Aanenson, who rented a trailer home to Henderson and his girlfriend, Chasity Pasley, 20. “He’s a pizza-eating, beer-drinking, fishing, hunting, work-on-your-car type of kid — just regular.”

On the night of Oct. 6, Henderson was in the company of McKinney, a 5-foot-7 high school dropout known around Laramie for his vicious temper and bigoted attitudes. “Aaron kind of had a Napoleon syndrome,” says an acquaintance, Shawna Helling, 18. “He had to be a little big man.” McKinney had reportedly also been troubled by the 1993 death of his mother, Denise Timothy, from an infection she contracted after an operation. In 1995 his stepfather received a wrongful death settlement and nearly \$100,000 of the money went to McKinney. Yet he apparently squandered the money on partying and a Mustang with a cutting-edge sound system. “During the day, he’d sleep, get high, read hot-rod magazines and listen to rap,” says Gabe Martinez, 21, who hung out with him in 1995. McKinney had been in trouble with the law more than a dozen times, mostly for minor offenses. Last December he burglarized a Kentucky Fried Chicken, stealing \$2,500. Authorities caught up with him last spring in Pensacola, Fla., where he was living with girlfriend Kristen Price, 18, who in May gave birth to the couple’s son Cameron. (Sentencing is still pending.) “Aaron had anger in him,” says Martinez, a musician. “And once he gets mad and gets started, there’s no stopping him.”

Still, it remains a mystery what might have moved McKinney to the kind of violence that killed Shepard. Kristen Price told *The Denver Post* that McKinney claimed Shepard had “pushed himself onto” McKinney, embarrassing him in front of his friends. Eyewitness Galloway, however, says, “I refute 100 percent

that Shepard approached them.” To teach him a lesson, Price said, McKinney and Henderson told Shepard they were gay and lured him into the truck. “It wasn’t meant to be a hate crime,” she said. “They just wanted to rob him.” Yet once their blood was up, they didn’t stop. After disposing of Shepard, they returned to town around 1 a.m. and reportedly picked a fight with two Hispanic teenagers, one of whom was hospitalized after McKinney allegedly hit him on the head with a pistol butt. When McKinney finally came home, Price told ABC’s 20/20, “He just came in and hugged me and said, ‘I’ve done something horrible. I just deserve to die.’”

He may yet. Police have charged McKinney and Henderson with first-degree murder, which in Wyoming can carry the death penalty. Their girlfriends, Pasley and Price — who allegedly hid Henderson’s bloody clothes and failed to report the crime — are charged as accessories to murder after the fact, which is punishable by up to three years in prison. County court Judge Robert Castor has imposed a gag order forbidding their lawyers and the prosecution from talking about the case.

The sheer brutality of the crime sent shock waves across America, prompting President Bill Clinton to decry Shepard’s attackers as “full of hatred or full of fear or both,” and igniting numerous vigils and protests. (A web site set up by Shepard’s friends drew more than a million hits.) “I am so p—ed off, I can’t stop crying,” [Ellen DeGeneres](#) said at an Oct. 14 gathering at the U.S. Capitol. The president and others called on Congress to broaden federal hate-crimes legislation — which now covers offenses perpetrated because of racial, religious and ethnic status — to include victims attacked on account of their sexual orientation. Wyoming legislators have tried for years to enact antibias laws, only to be defeated by opponents concerned that such a law would give minorities special rights. “This year,” says Democratic Rep. Mike Massie of Laramie, “I think we will be standing in line to reintroduce that bill.”

Yet it hardly seems likely that words in a law book would have defended Matthew Shepard against the beating that cost him his life. His friends can only speculate about what might have happened if someone had gone with him that night to the Fireside. Romaine Patterson is still haunted by a call she got from Shepard less than 24 hours before the attack, at 2 a.m. that Tuesday. It was their first conversation in a while, but he had sounded as buoyantly hopeful as ever. “He told me, ‘My goal right now is to do what I can, in any way, shape or form, to better humanity,’ ” she recalls.

Ironically, Shepard’s aim in life may have been achieved in part by his death, which has prompted deep soul-searching and an emotional outpouring from so many people he never knew. “Judging from the world’s response over the last several days,” Reverend Kitch told the mourners in Casper, “Matt will have made a difference in the lives of thousands.”