

**Matthew Shepard Memorial Lecture, Brown University (3/14/2000)**

**Jeffrey Montgomery**  
**Executive Director, The Triangle Foundation**

*I am very pleased and proud to have been asked to come here to Brown University and deliver this first Matthew Shepard Memorial Lecture. I did not know Matt Shepard during his short life, but I have come to know him, as most of the world has, by his death.*

*Like many activists, especially those of us who are exposed daily to the ravages of anti-glbtc violence, I have an uneasy relationship with Matt. Or, more appropriately, to Matt Shepard. Most of us who do this work are constantly in conflict about the use of victims and their stories. On one hand we don't desire to exploit them and their trauma, but on the other hand, we need to tell their stories in order for the senseless episode that changed their life—often ended it— might be used to illustrate a truth.*

*That would be the truth of the risk and danger that defines the lives of all GLBT people every day.*

*And let's not make any mistake, or gloss over that fact: Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people are at risk every day of their lives. Not only are we the group most at risk of violence, we are most at risk of job discrimination, losing our families; homophobia retains its title as the last socially acceptable form of bigotry. Anti-glbtc sentiment is a primary tool for organizing the far-right and it is stronger than ever as a means to split communities and reinforce constituencies.*

*So, we are faced with lives interrupted; lives destroyed; lives forever changed. And we believe that the stories of those people must be used and told and told again. We have to put a real human face, a real human event on the plague of hate violence.*

*Bias violence is not abstract or an academic problem.*

*I gather that almost everyone in the world—at least those parts of the world with any media access at all— has heard the name of Matthew Shepard. But how many have heard of Alex Charles?*

*Alex was one of the 35-or-so other people killed during the year between Matt's murder and the trial of Aaron McKinney, the man who killed Matt. Alex was close to Matt's age. Matt was 21; Alex was 15. Matt died after being beaten with a gun. Alex died after being shot with one. Both Matt and Alex were killed because they allegedly made a sexual advance toward their killers. Matt was gay. Alex was not.*

*But the stories of Matt and Alex are bound together by society's unabated homophobia.*

*Matt's story is well known. The young, slight, shy but personable University of Wyoming student was lured out of a bar in Laramie by two men who posed as gay in an effort to get him alone to rob him. They suggested that there would be a sexual encounter. Once in their truck, and maybe because Matt made a pass at him, McKinney said, "We're not gay, and you've been jacked." The beating and pistol-whipping followed; Matt was taken to the outskirts of town, tied to the now-famous fence and left there for 18 hours before being discovered. Four days later he would die from the injuries.*

*At McKinney's trial, which I attended in Laramie, his attorneys advanced a defense theory known as "gay" or "homosexual" panic. Put simply, "gay panic" works to win reduced convictions or acquittals by arguing that a gay advance by the victim is so revolting that the killer has no choice but to act out violently, often actually killing the victim. This defense is almost always successful.*

*In the Shepard case, it saved McKinney from a first-degree murder conviction. "Gay panic" is insidious. It appeals to juries, who are allegedly made up of random members of the community. What defense lawyers know is that most people are repulsed by the idea of gay —especially gay male— sex. Those lawyers know that a claim of defense against an alleged gay sexual advance will win points with the jury of peers.*

*So, what of Alex Charles? Alex was a typical 15-year-old. From a loving family. He was active in sports. One day he and another student from his school went to a well-known, but relatively secluded spot by a little river in their community. Alex thought they were getting away to smoke a joint.*

*His pal, Justin Wallace had another plan. It seems that Alex had advised Justin's girlfriend that Justin wasn't good enough for her, that he was trouble. Justin was mad about that. The day he and Alex went to the river Justin took a gun. And at a moment when Alex had his back turned, Justin shot him. Cold-blooded murder.*

*At his trial, and totally out of the blue, Justin and his lawyer came up with the story that Alex grabbed Justin's crotch —a gay sexual advance. And because he happened to have a gun with him, the older boy reacted by shooting Alex. Simple as that.*

*Despite the fact several witnesses affirmed that Alex was not gay, and that not one shred of the forensic evidence supported the story. Justin Wallace, who faced adult first-degree murder charges, was found guilty of simple manslaughter.*

*We know, from post-verdict interviews with jurors, that the jury was convinced, because of an effective "gay panic" defense, that Alex's life was worthless. That if he made a homosexual advance —IF—then he deserved to die and his killer would be let off easy. Justin Wallace will be sentenced this coming Friday. He could get probation. "Gay panic" is insidious. It is corrupt because it appeals to a public that is used to discarding and disregarding gay lives.*

*I became involved in gay activism as a result of my boyfriend Michael's murder about fifteen years ago. The day after his funeral, the prosecutor told me that the Detroit Police had told them not to expect any warrants in the case, because the homicide division wasn't investigating the crime.*

*Why not? Because it was "just another gay killing." Michael's murder, along with about a dozen other gay killings in Detroit in the mid-to-late 80s, remains unsolved to this day.*

*Are we that disposable? Here, just outside Providence, in 1997, Bryan Nisenfeld walked out of his class at Roger Williams University, over in Bristol, and was never seen again. Within a few months his ankle and foot were found on Hog Island. Bryan had reported that he had been the victim of harassment. His parents were not notified of his disappearance for six days, no investigation was made of his vanishing for months. Nothing —not even his parents' frantic mission to find their son— moved the investigation along.*

*The school was entrenched in its position of denial and cover-up. For almost three years the disappearance of Bryan Nisenfeld remained a mystery. Even more of mystery: why was no one concerned? We now know the answer. It has recently come to light, through a better-late-than-never State Police investigation, that at the time of his disappearance, the episode was deemed a "homosexual matter," by campus security. That fateful utterance apparently set the tone and pace of indifference.*

*Disposable lives. We can not live as disposable people. The broader community, which has firmly established compulsory heterosexuality as the law of the universe, has to get over its problem with us.*

*Fortunately, our community has been able to build our own structure and network of advocacy and activism and has created a means for political and social response when we have been threatened and attacked, and in the face of the marginalization and invisibility imposed on us.*

*While it is all too true that there is no single monolithic voice or unified agreement about what it means to be glbt-identified, this "glbt community" has been able to unite behind some basic consensus of what we need to achieve in order to claim the right of full citizenship.*

*We want equality and the right to be left alone.*

*We want to be able to move freely and safely in our daily lives,  
free from the threat of random hate violence.*

*We want to be able to freely associate, without fear that our privacy,  
including the privacy of our intimate consensual relations, will be compromised  
by intrusive and abusive selective enforcement of laws or moral codes.*

*We want to be able to live with the person we choose in legally sanctioned  
arrangements or marriage, to be able to build and maintain families and raise children,  
with the full protections and benefits that attain to those relationships.*

*We want glbt youth to have access to safe and inclusive education experiences, in both public and private  
educational institutions, no longer dispirited by judgmental, prejudicial systems that contribute to low self-  
esteem and leave them at risk.*

*These are the basic rights and expectations yet to be achieved*

*for GLBT people in this land of the free. GLBT people across this country only want equality*

*and to be left alone, left to pursue our dreams and aspirations and our part of the American promise,  
which should be our birthright.*

*But the cards are stacked against us.*

*Scurrilous and abusive rhetoric is spewed by politicians and so-called religious leaders, who cloak themselves by turning the Constitution on its head and claim protection and permission to demonize and denigrate us.*

*Hiding behind the perversion of the concepts of religious freedom and political speech, those people have carved out a special right to impose their bigotry and hatred for us. And that seems to be acceptable. Well, it isn't.*

*They assault our democratic sensibilities and the foundations of fairness and equality that theoretically define us as a people. Those who drive official policy are operating under the influence of rhetoric and toxic thinking that can only lead to a fatal collision of our ideals as freedom-loving people and the restrictive, anti-family fractiousness of radical extremism.*

*Is it any wonder that those who attack us feel they have a license to do so? A license to kill?*

*Police won't investigate. Juries won't convict.*

*The public still thinks our lives are a political issue, defined by the mythic "Gay Agenda.*

*"America... You Kill Me! America kills all of us.*

*Do we choose to be willing lambs, led to slaughter? Or do we claim our citizenship, at any cost? Our call to people of goodwill and justice, and especially to all gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender people, and those who support and love us —our allies in the fight for liberty and justice for all— our call is to take action.*

*Become involved at every level of possibility. Here, at Brown, in your workplace, your county and city government, and, especially, in being vigilant and forceful in shaping your communities, however they are defined, into an honest and true reflection of what we all know they can be.*

*We can meet the challenge posed as the year 2000 begins and for many years to come. As new generations of activists come forward with new ideas and sensibilities; as the political landscape evolves and changes; as new technologies are born and developed; and as the mercurial focus of issues present new concerns and dangers... Our strength, creativity, harnessed rage and effective activism will remain constant and be the root source of our salvation in the future.*

*Matthew Shepard became a poster boy. He became a poster boy for hate crimes; he became a poster boy for tolerance. He didn't volunteer for the job. His image was appropriated; the story of his sickening death has become a great legend.*

*Matthew Shepard should be a symbol. But it misses the point if it ends only with legislation. It misses the point if it's about mere tolerance.*

*Matt's murder is a parable for our times. It tells of what happens to the conscience of the country when it fails to be free for all and accord every person dignity. How we consume and destroy our children...our future.*

*America has killed Matt, Alex Charles, Bryan Nisenfeld and thousands of our other gay, trans, bi and lesbian brothers and sisters.*

*It is up to us —the witnesses for the prosecution— to bring justice to the land.*

*Copyright © 2023 AMERICA YOU KILL ME - All Rights Reserved.*