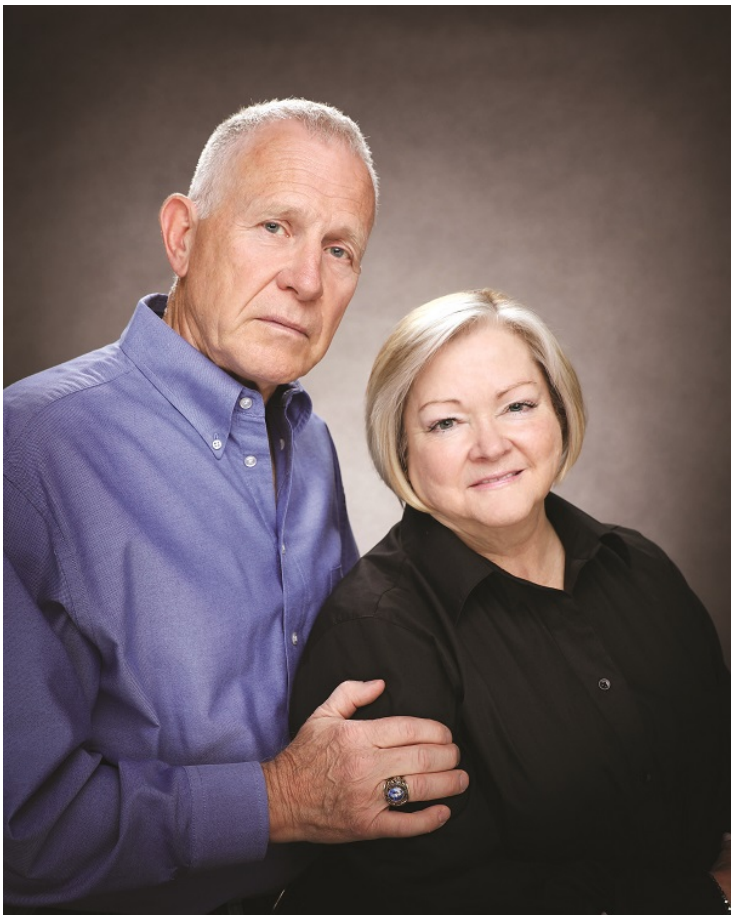
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Sharing Matthew?s story is more important than ever for Judy and Dennis Shepard



By Brock Weir

Her son was just like any other youth just entering his twenties.

He was a young man trying to figure out not what he wanted to do with his life, but who he was and wanted to be.

But Judy Shepard's son never had the chance to find out what lay ahead for him on the road of life.

Matthew Shepard's life was tragically cut short aged 21 when the young gay man was beaten, tortured and left to die near Laramie, Wyoming twenty years ago last October.

His murder sent shockwaves around the world, drawing attention to hate crimes, and ultimately spurring anti-hate crime legislation in his name.

His legacy lives on through the Matthew Shepard Foundation, founded by parents Judy and Dennis Shepard, which advocates for LGBTQ rights around the world, and his story sparked an acclaimed play, which continues to spur dialogue on hate and tolerance to this day.

Next week, Judy and Dennis are set to bring their tireless efforts to make hate crimes a thing of the past to the local level as students at King's Country Day School prepare to mount the play, The Laramie Project, for the community.

?Matt loved theatre and he would have loved the concept of what The Laramie Project represents,? says Judy, who, alongside Dennis, will be offering ?talk-backs? with audience members after each performance at CDS. ?Matt was just like these students; he was a young person in search of his life, trying to figure out what it is he wanted to do. He just wanted to be who he was and he didn't want to be afraid.?

If Matt was ever previously bullied or challenged because of his sexuality, it's not something he ever shared with his parents, she said. Nevertheless, Judy says it is so important to share with students and the entire community how important it is ?for kids to be themselves and not what somebody else thinks they should be.?

?You can't spend your entire life doing that, and when you have the opportunity to be surrounded by so many opportunities to learn about the world, the diversity of the world, the history of the world, you take every opportunity to do that and not spend the blink of your lifetime in high school worried about how you're going to fit in with the crowd,? says Judy. ?If everyone would develop that philosophy, perhaps bullying would not be the thing that it is today.?

Sadly, however, bullying is still a prevalent threat around the world and Judy doesn't yet see a light at the end of that particular tunnel.

Last October, in conjunction with the twentieth anniversary of Matt's death, his remains were placed in Washington's National Cathedral, the only place his parents felt he could be laid to rest that wouldn't be threatened by vandalism and desecration. His internment was part of a wider series of events in Washington to mark the anniversary, including an exhibition of the Smithsonian Institute.

?The twentieth anniversary of losing Matt brought things to the forefront for a period of time,? says Judy. ?I'm not sure how long it will last, but we'll just keep doing the work that we do. The goal of the Matthew Shepard Foundation is to shut the doors so we're not needed anymore, that we've accomplished all we've set out to do, we can't do any more from our end, and the rest is up to you guys. We thought in the election of 2016, with the election of Secretary Clinton, that we would stay on this path towards progress, towards civil rights for the LGBT in our world, and that didn't happen.

?[We often speak after performances of The Laramie Project] because we feel keeping Matt's story out there and available, because it is unfortunately relevant still, even more so in the last couple of years, and it is a cautionary take. In the beginning, we thought we had to take advantage of what little time we had to tell the story, so any opportunity we had to tell it, we told it. It is unfortunate it is still relevant, but it feels more important to continue telling the story right now because we feel we have taken steps backward.?

But, when it comes to The Laramie Project, the dynamic has, in some cases, changed for the better. When the play saw its first performances, it was often greeted by anti-gay protests in communities in which it was being staged, a sure sign they hadn't actually read the play, says Judy. Now, community protests are largely a thing of the past.

?If there's a protest by some group, another group will counter-protest and even do the play themselves or provide a venue for the play,? she says, noting the never saw the play in its entirety until 2013. ?It's an emotional rollercoaster. For my husband and me, you're just watching your life be lived right in front of you all over again, which is hard. I can never watch the courtroom scene at the end because it is surreal. It just takes me right back and I don't want to do that.?

Matt's parents also feel that their presence in the audience might make performers feel uncomfortable or put undue pressure on them.

?I love the idea that this is a unifying experience for the cast and crew, that this is a lifetime experience that will live with them forever and, when they communicate [Matt's story with the audience] it will become an experience for them as well,? says Judy, with her voice cracking. ?I don't know why I'm crying, that's stupid, but it is so real and important to understand how important it is to be kind to one another.?

Post-show talk backs, however, are where the Shepards feel most comfortable and, each time they have done so, they are greeted by people who are ?very kind, sympathetic and appreciative that we have taken the opportunity to speak out and tell the story, thinking perhaps it has made the world a safer place for their children. Just knowing there are other parents out there speaking is really important. To actually do it is really important, but you know in their hearts, they feel, ?Thank God it wasn't my child.'?

The Laramie Project runs at Country Day School February 28 ? March 2. For more information, including tickets, visit www.cds.on.ca/events.