

Matthew Shepard's parents encourage love after students tackle Laramie Project



By Brock Weir

It's not enough to be "tolerant." Rather, we should celebrate the differences and diversity in our everyday life.

That was the message delivered to students, parents and the community at large last month by Judy and Dennis Shepard, the parents of Matthew Shepard, following The Country Day School's production of *The Laramie Project*, which follows the aftermath of Matt's murder, a gay hate crime, in small-town America.

Judy and Denis made the journey from their Wyoming home to speak to members of the community after each performance of the play, which wrapped up March 2.

Neither have seen the compelling and award-winning play all the way through more than once. It is a subject, of course, that is still raw, but they also know their presence in the audience might add extra pressure on the actors bringing this story to life on stage.

But the Shepards put everyone at ease at question-and-answer sessions after each performance, bringing with them a message of tolerance, but, most importantly, love.

Tolerance, said Judy, can sometimes have a negative connotation, "over there, but not next to me." Instead, focus should be placed on love.

"I think we have come a long way in society," said Judy when asked what changes she has experienced towards acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community since Matthew's death just over 20 years ago. "Society, I think, has come a really long way. In the US, we're experiencing a turnaround. The current

administration just doesn't happen to like gay people very much, so we're struggling there, but I think society at large [is improving] particularly because so many people now feel comfortable at work and in their homes, being out and who they are.

?I think that's what changed the fabric of acceptance as a whole. People of influence are coming out. I think as a whole the community is changing and we've just come really far, just not quite far enough yet.?

Prompted by questions from the audience, the Shepards outlined a number of challenges they see facing society today. The recent controversy over actor Jessie Smollett, who claimed he was the victim of an anti-gay hate crime in Chicago before police alleged his claim was actually a hoax, was just one example.

?It is a big, muddy mess, but the idea that anyone would create a crime like that and cause that much attention hurts real victims of hate crimes because now [people might look at] what happen to him and think, 'Nobody's going to believe me now' or 'I am just not even going to report it.' It really does hurt and it hurts the credibility of all the work we're trying to do around the many, many hate crimes that do happen. It was a really selfish thing to do.?

Since Matthew's murder, the Shepards have dedicated themselves to stamping out hate crimes and fostering a world of acceptance through The Matthew Shepard Foundation. When asked what challenges they have faced in the process, the Shepards cited religion, specifically those who 'refuse to let go of the mythology of what they have been taught,' as well as 'wilful ignorance' as some of the primary stumbling blocks.

?When anti-LGBT issues are being preached from the pulpit, it is really, really damaging the heart and soul of the individual, but also the community at large, because it reinforces the mythology,' said Judy. The thing to overcome that is now, 20 years later, religion is also falling behind. Some religions now are more accepting and even encouraging to the gay community, but I never understood how anybody could think that religion and being gay is mutually exclusive. You don't have to give up one to be the other, that's just nuts.?

Parents, they said, also don't have to give up the dreams they might have had for their children should they come out to them.

Asked what advice they would give to parents who are grappling with their child's coming out process, they said that parents might have specific dreams about a 'well travelled road', one that includes milestones like proms, graduations, weddings, and grandchildren. All those things are still true, they said, but they are just a little different.

?We have no patience for parents who are not accepting,' said Judy, noting that each coming out process is different for the individual

and their parents. 'Sometimes you come to a fork in the road and you think, 'I have no idea what to do now,' and you have to trust your kids to be the teacher. That was our experience. Struggling is okay, but saying 'no' is not okay. They are your kids, your responsibility and you loved them five seconds ago ' why don't you still love them? Nothing about them has changed. Parents who are still struggling need to make an effort.'

Added Dennis: 'Show support, encourage and love. That's key. We didn't care Matt was gay; he was just our son. A lot of times we'll close [these talkbacks] by saying, 'Matt was not our son; he was our son who happened to be gay.' That's important.'