



WISCONSIN STATE SENATOR
TIM CARPENTER
SENATOR – 3RD DISTRICT

State Capitol • PO Box 7882 • Madison, WI 53707-7882 • Phone: (608) 266-8535

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CONTACT:

Senator Tim Carpenter

Sen.Carpenter@legis.wi.gov

Matthew Shepard’s Story Continues to Haunt and Inspire Us after 22 Years

(MADISON)—Today, Senator Tim Carpenter issued the following statement regarding the anniversary of the death of Matthew Shepard on this day in 1998:

“Today is the anniversary of a story that shocked our nation 22 years ago, when two men targeted and murdered a young gay man named Matthew Shepard.

“On October 12th, in 1998 Matthew Shepard succumbed to the injuries he withstood in a brutal beating and being abandoned on a roadside in rural Wyoming. His murderers had targeted him as a victim, and lured him to a rural location, fractured his skull in their beating, robbed him, and then tied him to a barbed wire fence and left him for dead. After 18 hours, he was found there, comatose, by a passerby. Matthew never regained consciousness following the attack, and was pronounced dead six days later in an advanced trauma ward of Poudre Valley Hospital in Fort Collins Colorado.

“In his confession to authorities, one of the murderers repeatedly used homosexual slurs when he talked about his victim. As a defense plea, this man claimed that Matthew Shepard had touched him, and that this suggestion of a sexual advance threw him into a fit of insanity which led him to commit the brutal murder. Today, this is known as the ‘gay panic’ defense.

“News of Matthew’s murder quickly spread throughout the country, inspiring the action of gay rights advocacy groups in order to establish hate crime legislation that could deter people from targeting individuals based on their sexual orientation or expression of gender. *It took Congress over 10 years to recognize the need for this hate crime legislation*, and pass the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, signed into law by President Obama in 2009.

“Shortly after Matthew’s death, his grieving parents established the Matthew Shepard Foundation, with the purpose of advocating for the value of diversity, dignity and equality for all people, and providing outlets and resources for young people struggling with identity-based persecution. I have had the great honor of meeting Judy Shepard, Matthew’s mother, and having a moment to discuss her family’s struggle through grief, and the good works of the Matthew Shepard Foundation.

“Although many advancements for gender and identity rights have been achieved in Matthew’s name, discrimination and hate on the basis of people’s expressions of love and identity persist in our society. This year has seen the highest records for murders targeting transgender people, the majority of those killed being persons of color. In 2016, we saw one of the most devastating examples of this sentiment as 49 people were killed by a gunman at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, which was targeted for being a gay nightclub.

“In Wisconsin, we have still not recognized the harmful effects of conversion therapy. A bill has gone unheard in our legislature for years that would put an end to conversion therapy for minors. It is unconscionable that this practice is still permissible at the state level even while therapists and many of our communities consider the practice to be unethical. It is past time that this bill be given a public hearing and be brought to the floor of the Legislature for a vote.

“Despite all of the progress that has been made since Stonewall in 1969, there is still so much more that can be done in our state and across the country. As we remember Matthew’s life, we should look for ways that we can honor his legacy by working to create a world that welcomes all types of people and rejects hatred.”

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