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Matthew Shepard Will Be Interred at the Washington National Cathedral, 20 Years After His Death

By Jacey Fortin

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For 20 years, the ashes of Matthew Shepard have not been laid to rest.

Mr. Shepard's killing in 1998, when he was a 21-year-old college student, led to national outrage and, almost overnight, turned him into a symbol of deadly violence against gay people.

Mourners flocked to his funeral that year in Casper, Wyo., but there were also some protesters, carrying derogatory signs. Mr. Shepard's parents worried that if they chose a final resting place for their son, it would be at risk of desecration.

Now they have found a safe place. On Oct. 26, Mr. Shepard will be interred at the Washington National Cathedral, the neo-Gothic, Episcopal house of worship that is a fixture of American politics and religion.

"I think it's the perfect, appropriate place," Dennis Shepard, Matthew's father, said in an interview on Thursday. "We are, as a family, happy and relieved that we now have a final home for Matthew, a place that he himself would love."

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Two decades ago, Matthew Shepard was robbed by two men, pistol-whipped and tied to a fence in Laramie. He hung there bleeding in near-freezing temperatures until a passing bicyclist spotted him, thinking at first that he was a scarecrow. He later died in a hospital.

"His death was a wound on our nation," Mariann Edgar Budde, the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, said in an interview on Wednesday. "We are doing our part to bring light out of that darkness and healing to those who have been so often hurt, and sometimes hurt in the name of the church."

The elder Mr. Shepard said his family had long searched for a fitting resting place for his son, who was once an altar boy in the Episcopal Church. They considered spreading his ashes over the mountains and plains of Wyoming, but still wanted a place they could visit to talk to him. They considered splitting the ashes.

At the cathedral, not only will the family be able to visit him, but so will guests from across the world.

“It’s a place where there’s an actual chance for others to sit and reflect about Matthew, and about themselves, and about their friends,” Mr. Shepard’s father said.

Mr. Shepard’s friend Jason Marsden remembers him as a young man who was passionate about global politics and human rights. He remembers the funeral in 1998 — how the attendees overflowed into nearby churches, and how some people came to protest with their signs.

Now Mr. Marsden, who works to promote his friend’s legacy as the executive director of the Matthew Shepard Foundation, plans to be there in Washington this month when Mr. Shepard’s ashes are interred in the crypt.



Washington National Cathedral during Senator John McCain’s funeral last month. About 200 people have been interred there. Jason Andrew for The New York Times

“It is a noteworthy place to be at rest, and it invites conversations about the importance of this person and what this person represents in American history,” he said.

Mr. Marsden added that Mr. Shepard liked his church in Wyoming and would have appreciated being interred at the grand cathedral in Washington. “I think that with Matt’s sense of occasion and drama, he would have found that tremendously gratifying and very cool,” he said.

The cathedral regularly hosts prayer services and memorials for politicians and presidents. It recently hosted Senator John McCain's funeral. The ceremony on Oct. 26 will begin with a public service in the morning, and the ashes will be interred privately.

Bishop Budde will preside over the event alongside the Rev. V. Gene Robinson, who became the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church in 2003. He has since retired.

Bishop Robinson said he had been working with Mr. Shepard's parents on issues affecting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people for years. He said that Mr. Shepard's mother asked him about the possibility of interring her son's ashes at the cathedral, and that he helped to make it happen.

"God can take something very, very bad and make something good come out of it," he said. "I think that's exactly what the Shepards have done for all of us, taking this tragic, awful event and making something meaningful and productive out of it."

Bishop Robinson said the country had made good progress on civil rights for L.G.B.T. people since Mr. Shepard's killing, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage.

Mr. Shepard's name was on a bill, signed into law in 2009, that expanded the definition of violent federal hate crimes to include those committed because of a victim's sexual orientation. And the Washington National Cathedral has honored Mr. Shepard before; in 2013, it hosted a screening of "Matt Shepard Is a Friend of Mine," a documentary about his life and death.

But the work is far from over, Bishop Robinson said, adding that people are still being hurt and killed because of their sexuality or committing suicide because of trauma or alienation.

Mr. Shepard's death "became a symbol of the kind of mindless, pointless violence against us for no other reason than being who we are," Bishop Robinson said. "It is important for us to remind ourselves that we are still trying to come out from under that shadow."

About 200 people have been interred at the cathedral in Washington, including President Woodrow Wilson, Adm. George Dewey of the United States Navy, Helen Keller and her teacher Anne Sullivan. Mr. Shepard will be a quite welcome addition, Bishop Budde said.

"A lot has changed in the 20 years since Matthew was abducted, tied to a fence and left to die," Bishop Budde said. "A lot has changed, but not everything has changed. It felt really important for us to say that we believe L.G.B.T.Q. people are beloved children of God, not in spite of their identities but because of who they are — who God created them to be."

Dennis Shepard said the family was "awe-struck" by the others resting at the cathedral.

"To have Matthew sharing a facility with people like that is above and beyond what we ever expected," he said.

Daniel Victor contributed reporting.

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