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After A Storm the Sun Will Shine

Ignorant points of views often turn to violence because misunderstandings turn into anger. The only thing our country needed was a single act of anger that morphed into hate which was so brutal, we as a whole could not look away anymore. Moises Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project investigated and wrote two plays by the name of *The Laramie Project* and *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later.* They have honed in a hateful act which was derived from Laramie, Wyoming, now seen by the rest of the United States as a town with an ignorant point of view. That hateful scorn was received by a young college student by the name of Matthew Shepard, on his short time on earth he was a young gay man who had aspirations on becoming a politician that specialized in human rights. From the little information that I have learned about Matthew I have gathered that his interests were on changing the worlds mindset on one of the most important issues, social justice and helping those in need. But thanks to the hate that is instilled in Laramie resident’s values, Matthew has been struck from our world. His killers, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, state that he made a pass at them while the rest of the witness’s in the bar that night state differently. Matthew apparently asked for a ride that night from Aaron and Russell the two then made a plan to rob Matthew, and they agreed to go through with it. They all drove away from the main part of town where Matthew’s life was about to change the world; on that horrific night, Matthew endured a beating like most could only imagine. These two men pointed so much hate against Matthew just because he was different than them. They felt they had the right to continuously hit him with the butt of a gun, when their hands needed a break they kicked him, spit on him, and who knows what else only to leave him tied up to a fence crucified like the Holy Bible scribed Jesus was. There he sat alone fighting for his life under the big Wyoming sky for eighteen hours, with a face so full of blood, making him barely recognizable. Matthew’s fight through all of this had people all over the world standing together against hate and for justice, but, change takes time. There are people who can empathize deep enough to eventually change; in order for Laramie, Wyoming to experience lasting change there needs to be a shift in values that’s not dehumanizing to the human-race, all the town has done is made minor changes while trying to rid themselves of the responsibility, like washing blood off hateful hands.

How this town came to obtain such hate is a mystery to some, to others, Laramie’s values seem to be the culprit. Zubaida Ula, a Muslim woman in Laramie with an inquisitive and passionate mindset and who’s in her twenties articulated, “C’mon guys, lets show the world that Laramie is not this kind of town.” But it IS that kind of a town. If it wasn’t this kind of a town, why did it happen here? I mean you know what I mean, like- that’s a lie. Because it happened here. So how could it not be a town where this kind of thing happens? Like, that’s just totally-like, looking at an Escher painting and getting all confused, like, it’s just totally like circular logic like how can you even say that? And we have to mourn this and we have to be sad that we live in a town, a state, a country where shit like this happens. I mean, these are people trying to distance themselves from this crime. And we need to own this crime. I feel. Everyone needs to own it. We are like this. We ARE like this. WE are LIKE this” (Kaufman 57). The entire town is taught the same types of love and hate but every mind doesn’t always receive the same message. Laramie’s values have spread hate like poison in the town’s water well. Some however, are in disbelief that that kind of hatred came from Laramie, the people of the town just want the whole thing to go away. As Deb Thomsen-editor of the Laramie Boomerang, local Laramie newspaper-stated that, “I think everything is a hate crime. You have to have some kind of hatred in you to do that to another human being. As far as where that hatred comes from, I really couldn’t tell you. Most people in the community, they’re aware of what’s happened here, they know the anniversary is coming up, but we really are moving on from this” (Kaufman 123). Instead of changing their culture and promoting constant enlightenment on the subject, Laramie’s values still hold strong as they move along. In order to move along they have gotten rid of the fence where Matthew was beaten, and tolerate new LGBT fads.

Who could possibly bring so much transforming diversity to a place where being different is never accepted? Matthew Shepard wasn’t just a homosexual young man that was in the wrong place at the wrong time, he is so much more. Romaine Patterson – a very young lesbian, energetic, wearing a leather jacket, and twenty-one years old – expresses, “Matthew definitely had a political side to him…. I mean, he really wanted to get into political affairs… that’s all his big interest was, was watching CNN and MSNBC, I mean, that’s the only TV station I ever saw his TV tuned in to. He was just really smart in political affairs, but not too smart on common sense things” (Kaufman 17). His mindset is rare, thinking he can change the world even though he’s this tiny hopeful boy that most don’t fear. Only those who are crazy enough to think they can change the world actually do. He wanted to bring happiness to those who seek it, safety to those who are tired of being afraid, and unconditional love to those who have never had it.

Now that attention has come to the burning hatred of the town, some change had to come in order to control some of the flame. This flame that’s best explained with the words of Marge Murray - Reggie Murray’s mother, has emphysema from many years of smoking, still smokes, and is seventy years old - who spoke the words, “As far as the gay issue, I don’t give a damn way or the other as long as they don’t bother me. And even if they did, I’d just say no thank you. And that’s the attitude of most of the Laramie population. They might poke one, if they were in a bar situation, you know, they had been drinking, they might actually smack one in the mouth, but then they’d just walk away. Most of ‘em said, they would just say, “I don’t swing that way” and whistle on about their business. Laramie is live and let live” (Kaufman 15). Even though the act of hatred left a permanent burn, Laramie’s perception has slowly morphed into tolerance and for a few, acceptance. As Catherine Connolly, out lesbian professor at the university, said, “On campus the biggest difference would be the symposium for social justice” (Kaufman 124). Explaining how the symposium she also stated, “The name changed to the Shepard Symposium for Social Justice several years ago, and not only is it a university conference but kids from all over Wyoming are coming to the Shepard Symposium. Great big yellow school buses of kids coming in to hear these speakers talk about justice and social change. And you get thousands of people from the town participating, and for this town, that’s a lot of people. So, I’m giving you the good” (Kaufman 124). Though these small changes have opened the door for more, there seems to still be some that see what happened as something that was right. When a person finally views another without calling them an “it” or a “one” but is seen as him or her, more change will come. The simple naming of a building will just cover their back’s until another hateful act takes its place. The change must come in their daily conversation, values, and culture.

Judy Shepard, mother of Matthew, gives the reader additional background about Matthews bright spirit by saying, “Well, I guess I was pretty sure Matt was gay when he was eight years old, sometimes, you know, it’s something in the back of your mind. When he dressed up as Dolly Parton for Halloween- for the third time.” (Kaufman 183). She continued painting a picture for us when she recalls Matt calling her in the middle of the night to express the truth about who he was in, “Mom, I’ve got something I’ve got to tell you.” Judy remembers her first response being, “What took you so long to tell me?” (Kaufman 183). Only his mother would have known he was gay, but she didn’t know was how he was destined to change the world with his life. He awoke a sense of awareness, within the community he changed perceptions that were once ferociously aggressive, into a rally of hope and support.

As the Tectonic Theater Project reached out to those involved, they found that after ten years passed there are many members in the community, who doubt that this is a horrific event, refuse to accept that Matthews life being taken, was a hate crime. It started with the agent from the car rental, after questioning why they were in town, he wished them luck on their project and told them he wished everyone would “just let the boy go” (Kaufman 120). He then continues to tell us that he doesn’t think this crime happened because of Matthews sexuality and makes other excuses for Matthews murderers, “I think it was robbery and that his lifestyle was just an excuse” (Kaufman 120). The team then contacted Deb Thomsen, the editor of the main newspaper in Laramie, to see what the town might be doing when regarding the tenth year anniversary of Matthew’s death. Only to find they are only writing some story in their paper, she tells us the town has dealt with it and moved on. Throughout the town you continue to hear the cringing excuses town members make against Matthews life being taken. Have they really accepted the event and moved on? Or are they hiding behind each other so they don’t have to accept blame themselves. The entire town of Laramie is responsible for Matthew’s death by making the cowboy mentality the norm and causing everything to be in a state of bravado and manliness. Acting as if Matthew’s life was not taken because of his sexuality is just as bad as taking part of the crime themselves. Instead of letting Matthew’s death be forgotten the people of Laramie clearly need to be educated. People usually are afraid of what they do not understand or agree with. Moving on is always remembering what happened to Matthew and become more accepting of different lifestyles.

The Tectonic Theater Project has investigated and has put themselves in harm’s way in order for the American people to hear what has happened down in Laramie, Wyoming. They have put themselves in the cross hairs of those who hate gays so that we may see their evil. They are a storm of hatred that unleashes pain with blunt objects or anything they can find, just so they can bring the hatred in their minds into reality. Even though Matthew Shepard received Aaron and Russell’s storm of fury his death has brought something special. Though a death shouldn’t be the reason we all come together as one, his martyrdom did just that, calling to action Presidents, Governors, Doctors, Students, and anyone who will listen and empathize. Laramie has brought minor change to their town but this book has brought change to the rest of the United States by shining the light on these atrocities. Now that the storm is over, Wyoming’s sun of hatred will shine and never be forgotten.

Works Cited

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