

An Ordinary Boy

Rev. Yme Woensdregt

The whole world came to know his name. We called him Matthew. His family knew him as Matt. His mother Judy said he was an ordinary boy.

Matt was born in Casper, Wyoming in December 1976. He loved all the things other ordinary boys loved in Wyoming. He was a smallish kind of boy, and loved to go camping and fishing, and hunting. He loved to read: plays and stories, and especially Dr. Seuss. He wrote poems for the neighbours on the street where he lived and left them in their mailboxes. He sang songs with his father, and as he grew older those songs stuck with him.

In his journal, he wrote, “I am funny, sometimes forgetful, and messy and lazy. I am not a lazy person though. I am giving and understanding. And formal and polite. I am sensitive. I am honest. I am sincere. And I am not a pest.

“I am my own person. I am warm. I want my life to be happy and I want to be clearer about things. I want to feel good.

“I love Wyoming very much. I love theatre. I have good friends. I love succeeding. I love pasta. I love jogging and walking and feeling good. I love driving and music and helping and smiling and Charlie and Jeopardy. I love movies and eating and positive people and driving and walking and jogging and kissing and learning and airports and music and smiling and hugging and being myself.

“And oh, I love theatre! How I love theatre! And I love to be on stage!”

Matt was an ordinary boy, growing up in Wyoming. He felt ordinary yearnings and ordinary fears. Like almost every young boy, Matt just wanted to belong.

After high school, Matt moved about 250 km south to attend the University of Wyoming in Laramie. One day in October 1998, a couple months before Matt would turn 22, he attended a meeting of the University of Wyoming’s Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Association. After the meeting, he joined others for coffee at the College Inn.

Around 10:30 that night, like other ordinary college students, he went to the Fireside Bar. He met another couple of ordinary boys there, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. Around midnight, those two ordinary boys drove Matt to a remote area, tied him to a fence, pistol whipped him with a gun, beat him horribly, set him on fire, and left him to die in the freezing conditions of a Wyoming night. Matthew was tied to the fence almost eighteen hours.

He was found the next day by a cyclist, a fellow student, who thought at first that it was a scarecrow. Matthew was taken to the hospital, where he lay in a coma for several days on life support. He died several days later, Monday, October 12, 1998. His funeral at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church in Casper that Friday was picketed by Rev. Fred Phelps and members of the Westboro Baptist Church.

His name was Matthew Wayne Shepard. National media picked up his story. As the news spread, people across the country gathered in candlelight vigils. The story moved them, spurring them to speak silently for life over death, love over hate, light over darkness.

That fence became a shrine. Many people came to the fence to pay homage, to pray, to grieve, to leave flowers and other mementos.

The two attackers were arrested shortly after the attack, and charged with murder, kidnapping, and aggravated robbery. Both were convicted of murder and sentenced to two consecutive life sentences.

On November 5, 1999, at the sentencing hearing, Matt's father Dennis made a statement, which included these words of healing and grace. "By the end of the beating, his body was just trying to survive. You left him out there by himself, but he wasn't alone. There were his lifelong friends with him—friends that he had grown up with. You're probably wondering who these friends were. First, he had the beautiful night sky with the same stars and moon that we used to look at through a telescope. Then, he had the daylight and the sun to shine on him one more time—one more cool, wonderful autumn day in Wyoming. His last day alive in Wyoming. His last day alive in the state that he always proudly called home. And through it all he was breathing in for the last time the smell of Wyoming sagebrush and the scent of pine trees from the snowy range. He heard the wind—the ever-present Wyoming wind—for the last time. He had one more friend with him. One he grew to know through his time in Sunday school and as an acolyte at St. Mark's in Casper as well as through his visits to St. Matthew's in Laramie. I feel better knowing he wasn't alone."

Sheriff's Deputy Reggie Fluty, the first to attend the scene, told Judy Shepard that as she ran to the fence, she saw a large doe lying near Matt, as if the deer had been keeping him company all through the night.

I am both a Christian and a strong ally of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community—the internationally recognized acronym means 2–Spirited, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual; the plus reflects other ways in which people self-identify. As we use this evolving acronym, we are more respectful of how people choose to identify themselves. The love of Jesus compels me to welcome all people as the precious people they are.

Attacks on members of this community are increasing. It is a dangerous time. We need Pride month and Pride celebrations more than ever. As the Facebook meme has it, "Pride is not about turning straight kids into queer kids. Pride is about not turning queer kids into dead kids."