

7 *Laramie Inside Out*

Reflections 20 years later

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This essay is a coda to my 2004 film *Laramie Inside Out*, a personal documentary exploring the aftermath of Matthew Shepard's murder in my Wyoming hometown. My family had moved to Laramie in January 1970, in the middle of fifth grade; I graduated from Laramie High School in 1977, and the University of Wyoming—six blocks from our home—in 1981. Throughout that time, I remained closeted, never sharing my feelings with my “secret loves,” and certainly not being out to my family or friends. By the time Matthew was attacked in 1998, I had been living with my partner, Susan, for 10 years, was a professor and founding member of the Committee (now Institute) for LGBT Studies at the University of Arizona, played in a local lesbian rock band, had been running a lesbian film series for five years, and had made three short films that had been screened at queer film festivals all over the world. It was from this perspective, as an active and visible member of Tucson's LGBTQ community, that I returned to the site of my closeted adolescence to mourn Matthew's death, witness Laramie's response to it, and document both on film.

My documentary was completed in 2004, and over the next several years was screened at dozens of universities, conferences, and community events all over the country. It soon became clear that the core audiences for *Laramie Inside Out* were LGBTQ people and their allies in small towns, churches, campuses, and classrooms in the heartland. I was fortunate to be able to accompany the film for Q&A at most of these events, and felt in each venue the aspiration for and commitment to creating cultural and legal changes that would make LGBTQ lives explicitly valued; the closet seemed to be cracking open in every direction. The most memorable screenings were not in New York, Los Angeles, or San Francisco, but rather in places like Grand Haven, Michigan; Emporia, Kansas; and Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

For the first several years after the murder, Matthew Shepard was a household name for LGBTQ people and, it seemed, most American adults. *The Laramie Project*—the play based on his murder and produced by the

New York based Tectonic Theatre Company—was one of the most performed dramas in the country for over a decade, and when screening my film, I often met college students who had been in high school productions of it. Audiences showed up at my screenings to get the “Laramie-girl!” perspective that distinguished my personal documentary from the play produced in a northern metropole. A handful of screenings were programmed in conjunction with productions of *The Laramie Project*, which made for thought-provoking discussions about how both the play and the documentary film shaped real people into fictional characters.

But as the murder receded farther into the past, there came a moment when the college students at screenings, too young to remember anything about this news story from 1998, had never heard the name Matthew Shepard, and the film gradually morphed from an account of current events into a historical document. As I watch *Laramie Inside Out* with students these days, the world depicted on the screen feels like a different era. Having come of age in the Obama years, the freshmen in my honors seminar on LGBTQ History Through Documentary Film share a matter-of-fact assumption of queer visibility and equality, and take the freedom to be themselves for granted. The film now takes its place among other documentaries that bring the history of the struggle for LGBTQ rights alive for succeeding generations.

I learned about Matthew’s attack days four days after it happened, in an email from a former professor at the University of Wyoming:

October 10, 1998, Laramie, Wyoming

Dearest Bev,

These past two days have been the most painfilled I have spent on this campus. Jim Osborn and others of the LGBTA are getting support from the community, but nothing can address the horror.

In love and trouble, Janice

Clearly Janice assumed I had already heard the news. But somehow I’d missed the national reports describing the vicious beating of a 21-year-old

UW student named Matthew Shepard. Matthew's death on October 12, the day after National Coming Out Day, became entwined with Gay Awareness Week on our campus that year and for years to come. Holding my candle at the crowded vigil on the University of Arizona mall, surrounded by students, colleagues, and community members, I felt called to return to Laramie and document the response to this shocking act of violence that had shattered what I had always seen as the community's "live and let live" self-image.

I drove into town Easter weekend (April 4, 1999), the night before the first murder trial was scheduled to begin. The next morning, Fred Phelps and his small band of "godhatesfags" followers from the Westboro Baptist Church would be picketing at the courthouse in a spring snowstorm. I grabbed my camera and a quick cup of coffee, and headed down Grand Avenue to see them in person. As I passed the courthouse, I caught sight of their neon pink, green, and yellow signs: "Matt in Hell," "Fags die, god laughs," "Gay Rights: AIDS, Hell." Phelps's followers were ringed by a dozen or more counterprotesters, dressed in white angel costumes, whose broad wings, artfully constructed of sheets and pvc pipes, blocked the signs' hateful messages. Outside the ring of angels swarmed squadrons of media cameras, boom mics, clipboards, cell phones, satellite trucks. Could this really be happening in sleepy little Laramie?

In the months that followed, I spent time getting to know the angels and their supporters all over town. Shooting most of the time as a one-woman crew, with a small and unimposing camera, I enjoyed intimate access to people and places off limits to a larger camera or crew. I found a vibrant campus LGBTQA (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Association) that was the public face of the queer community for University of Wyoming students and staff. I joined them for their weekly postmeeting coffee klatches at the Village Inn, bowled with their team on league night at Laramie Lanes, and grilled burgers at a weekend potluck that gathered together dozens of gay Laramie-ites in a town where I'd never known any before. I found a community of lesbian professors and supportive allies throughout the campus. I found that the terrible tragedy of Matthew's death, which at first had left people shell-shocked, bruised, and shattered, had over time spurred a sort of community soul-searching and jump-started gay rights organizing in the state of Wyoming as nothing had done before.

Laramie Inside Out is at once the story of how Matthew's death affected Laramie's gay community, and how I came to renew my relationship with my hometown. After college, I had left Laramie in search of my own lesbian identity. Creating the film was a transformative experience, which connected me to Laramie in a whole new way. Production began in spring

1999, on the eve of Russell Henderson's murder trial, and continued into 2002. In the course of numerous Laramie visits, I became close to the half-dozen "characters"/people whose stories are chronicled in the film.

There was **Jim**, leader of the student LGBT association in the fall of 1998, who was thrust into the spotlight as a spokesman for gay Wyoming immediately after the attack. **Mickey**, a self-described "lesbian with a lot of firepower," an avid outdoorswoman who joined me for Rendezvous—Wyoming's biggest Pride event in those years—"a big queer campout" in the mountains between Laramie and Cheyenne.

Nicki, an idealistic English teacher in training who proclaims education "the height of activism . . . to give this future generation voices of their own." **Father Roger**, the Newman Center priest who had organized the first vigil for Matthew when he still lay unconscious in the Ft. Collins hospital, a tireless advocate for the "essential human dignity of all people." **Jeff**, a deeply closeted ranch kid from tiny Chugwater, Wyoming, who came out to his family and friends in the wake of the murder, and became a Catholic because of Father Roger. **Jackie**, mother of my high school classmate, who became the ultimate PFLAG mom, volunteering for hours each week at the new Rainbow Resource Center on campus, established after the murder. And **Romaine**, who with Jim created the Angel Action response to the Westboro picketers, and acted as its spokesperson.

To help me think about what had changed in the 20 years since Matthew's murder, I convened a conversation in May 2017 with some of the key participants in the film who still live in Laramie, and together we pondered some questions about how the incident and its aftermath had affected them personally. Other participants who no longer live there, like Romaine, Father Roger, and Jeff Mack, shared their reflections in writing. I share their responses in the pages that follow to allow readers a glimpse of the complexities of LGBTQ life in Laramie and the terrible costs but also rewards of fighting for LGBTQ rights in this western town.

Jim

In the Fall of 1998, Jim Osborn was the president of the University of Wyoming's LGBTQA—a small student organization that had been putting the finishing touches on the Gay Awareness Week activities it had planned for the following week. Matthew had been at

their meeting on the evening of October 6, just a few hours before he was abducted and attacked. Despite his leadership role in the LGBTA, Jim had remained relatively closeted to his family and hometown. But when the news of Matthew's attack broke, he was thrust into the spotlight as the face of gay Laramie and even gay Wyoming, and never looked back. At the time of the attack, he was working in Information Technology on campus, while studying to be a public school teacher. Today, he is the University of Wyoming's Title IX Coordinator and Manager of Investigations, Equal Opportunity Report and Response for the Office of Diversity and Employment Practices.

[At first] it was a bit scary and overwhelming. I knew that someone had to speak on behalf of the group, and believed that I had the skills necessary (thanks to theater, speech and debate, student council, etc.). I felt a definite loss of privacy and had a very real understanding that because I was now quite public, I might also be a target. I remember someone recognizing me from the news when I was in O'Hare; her reaction was positive, but I had a moment of panic when she said, "Didn't I see you on the news because you knew that gay kid in Wyoming?"

I had been planning to follow the path of my degree, and look for work as a teacher in the public schools, incorporating diversity into my classroom in small but meaningful ways. Instead, my life became focused on diversity, inclusion, fairness, and using my voice to speak for those who are or have been silenced. I turned my passion into my profession, and now am in charge of responding to discrimination, sexual misconduct, and workplace violence on our campus. I've gone from being a student activist to a top-level administrator on campus, influencing policy decisions and institutional climate. The roadmap I had planned for my life took a 90-degree detour, but it has been the most rewarding and meaningful derailment.

Nicki

When I met Nicki Elder in April 1999, silently protesting Fred Phelps and his small band of Westboro Baptist Church picketers in her angel wings, she had already found her calling. A bubbly, idealistic double major in Women's Studies and Secondary Education/English, she was preparing for a semester of student teaching that fall, and ready to set the world on fire through her classroom. Now a beloved English teacher at Laramie High School, with over 17 years of full-time teaching under her belt, her passion for mentoring adolescents and igniting their own activism continues to burn unabated.

I was drawn to activism before Matthew died, joining the Women's Studies coalition, becoming a liaison for the UW LGBT student organization that is now known as Spectrum, and becoming part of the Amnesty International organization. I had just moved to Laramie from Casper, joined the same club in which Matt was a member (the LGTA), and knew many of the same people he knew. Learning that the two people who murdered Matt, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, had gone to Laramie High School—where I planned to student teach and do an internship starting the next semester—and that not only did they go to Laramie High, but there are accounts of them being bullied there. . . . My heart broke for Matthew Shepard, but I felt that if the other two young men hadn't been demoralized and bullied from youth into adulthood, maybe the drugs and other lifestyle choices they had made that led them to such brutality wouldn't have happened. Even more pertinent, if identifying as LGBTIQ in 1998 hadn't been so demonized in our culture, maybe this awful murder wouldn't have happened.

Three young men lost their lives in one way or another that day. I became motivated to become an educator who would make school safe and accepting for everyone. I wanted to make sure that silenced and disenfranchised students could find role models and empowerment. At

that time, it was harder to find curriculum about LGBTIQ authors, historical figures, or just empowering messages for LGBTIQ youth and their allies and families. I became motivated to fix that. I wanted every student I met to feel safe and welcomed.

Almost 20 years later, I have been a teacher at LHS for 15 years (as well as 2 years at an alternative school prior to that). I am honored to sponsor a human rights club, PeaceJam, and cosponsor our version of a GSA—SALLY (Safe Area for LGBTIQ+ LHS Youth and their ALLIES). I continue to revamp my curriculum to include a post-colonial perspective so that silenced voices are heard and celebrated. I have become an adult adviser and a trainer for Sources of Strength, which is technically a suicide prevention program but is even more a resilience program. The founder identified eight common strengths people could lean on in their lives that give them resilience and hope in hard times. If McKinney and Henderson had had more of these strengths in their lives, perhaps they would not have been drawn to the path that led to viciously stealing Matthew's life.

Jeff

Jeff Mack grew up on a ranch outside Chugwater, Wyoming, a hamlet 93 miles from Laramie (current population 203). When I met him in 1999, he was an admissions counselor at the University of Wyoming. Today, he is Director of Development for the National Opera in Washington, D.C. In between, he served in senior development positions for the Human Rights Campaign, the Outfest Film Festival, the Point Foundation, and the American Red Cross. He views his work raising funds in support of opera as politically progressive. "Modern opera is doing exactly what Mozart and Verdi did in their time—standing up to the man!"

As I sit here at my desk in the Kennedy Center, the nation's performing arts center, I know that ultimately, I owe so much of why I am here and who I am to Matthew. He

touched my life when he was alive and I would give anything to have him as a part of this world. His death sparked in me a desire to make change, to make the world a better place, to make a difference every single day.

Before Matthew's death, I was closeted and out to only a few select people. I was scared to death to let anyone know. The moment that happened to Matthew something switched in me and I had to fight back. It took a bit of time to break free from the scared feelings and the comfort of being in Wyoming—a familiar place. But I knew I had to do something. I moved to Denver and found a new community. I even did drag for a while, and that was such an embracing community. While in Denver I volunteered for the LGBTQ Center (The Center) and served on a fundraising committee. Through that I got to know Joe Barrows who was on the HRC Board. I asked him how I could go work for the Human Rights Campaign and save the world, or at least the gay world, and he helped me get a job.

HRC shaped me and taught me so much about myself, and in my four years there (2002–2006) we saw such change. Gay people were being seen more on TV, and there was just a different sense in the community. There was a war cry that had been started several years before, when Matthew died. As I look back on it, I feel that it was the second Stonewall. It was the spark that ignited a more fervent battle for rights and equality, both for me and for the nation and the world.

Jackie

Jackie Meranda's kids, John and Laurie, were in the Laramie High School band with me in the '70s, although I didn't know them well, and never met Jackie back then. But after a screening of some early rough-cut sequences of *Laramie Inside Out*, she introduced herself to me with a big smile and a hug, and I knew immediately that she had to be in the film. A woman of my mom's generation, who grew up in neighboring Cheyenne, she had never really thought

about gay people until Laurie informed her matter-of-factly that two of her male friends were planning to go to the prom together. When she learned of Matthew's attack, she headed over to the Student Union, in search of students to comfort.

Before that awful time, my only real concern about LGBT issues was knowing that John was gay and the worrying that people would think less of him or treat him badly simply because of that. Somewhere in the denial section of my brain, I'm sure I was aware that really awful things happened to gay people all the time—but like national disasters and such, only to people I'd never know and certainly not here in Laramie. Granted, I didn't know Matt or his family personally, but they somehow became mine as the nightmare played out. Matt could have been John and his family could have been mine. So . . . I made up my mind to mom-up and go to campus to see if anybody needed a hug or a shoulder to cry on—which, truth be told, I needed just as much.

Suddenly I found myself hanging out at the Rainbow Resource Center, participating in Safe Zone, and meeting amazing new people who became and will remain friends for the rest of my life—the kind that you pick up where you left off even if you don't see them often anymore. What a blessing.

Romaine

Romaine Patterson had met fellow Casper College student Matthew Shepard as a freshman, and the two became close friends. At his funeral two years later, she witnessed Fred Phelps and his Westboro contingent picketing outside St. Mark's Episcopal Church. When she found out they were coming to Laramie for Russell Henderson's trial six months later, she and her friend Jim Osborn dreamed up the idea of a silent counterprotest to block the Phelps gang's viciously homophobic neon signs with angel wings, and Angel Action was born. She was 20 years old at the

time, working as a waitress at a Denver coffee shop. In the nearly 20 years since, she has spoken at vigils and community events across the country, worked as a Regional Media Manager for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), served as a consultant for the development of *The Laramie Project* (in which she is also one of the main characters), produced and cohosted the popular drive-time talk show “Derek and Romaine” on Sirius/XM satellite radio’s OutQ station for over 12 years (2003–2015), and published the memoir *The Whole World Was Watching: Living in the Light of Matthew Shepard*.

Literally every part of my life has been influenced by Matthew’s death. I spent my early 20s working in activism and fighting for the rights of LGBT people and doing public speaking engagements at every opportunity. For a long time, I felt a certain responsibility to Matthew and the community to do my part in making the world a better place for LGBT people. However, all of that work eventually took a very emotional toll on me. It wasn’t until I was in my mid-20s and decided to write my book that I really took the time to sort through all of the emotional aspects of that time of my life. Writing my book was perhaps my way of navigating through all of the trials and errors I had made along the way as I attempted to honor Matthew’s memory. By that point I had gone from being interviewed by the world’s media to actively becoming a member of the media. I learned how powerful the media could be in changing the hearts and minds of people, and I very much wanted to be a part of that dialogue. Nearly 15 years later I am still working in LGBT media and still inspired by the ability of one person to create change in the world. I no longer feel like I have to serve Matthew’s memory, but I certainly take the time to appreciate all of the amazing opportunities that his life and his death provided me with. I hope that I have honored his memory in my work.

I worked at Sirius/XM for over 12 years, and during that time I feel as though I have provided an often thought-provoking and rare example of a lesbian talk show host. My life is lived in a very public way in order to provide a real-life example of not only who I am, but who I am as a lesbian. I have a 10-year-old daughter, and my show's audience has been with me every step of the way as I raise her. After leaving satellite radio I now own a small startup online radio company with my longtime radio cohost, Derek Hartley. Our goal is simple: we try to provide a safe space for our community to come together and share our lives in a fun and often entertaining way through a daily radio talk show. We continue to expand our programming to ensure that the diversity of our community is reflected in the diversity of our shows. Media is powerful, and I intend to use my voice to continue to change the world.

These first five narrators focus on the ways in which Matthew Shepard's death pushed them to face their fears and the continuing challenges facing LGBTQ people in a homophobic and transphobic culture. And each characterizes their work since that moment as framed by a commitment to activism for LGBTQ rights and against discrimination, hatred, and bigotry. In sharp contrast Mickey, the out and proud lesbian "with a lot of firepower," found herself surrounded by virulently homophobic coworkers and pushed back into the closet in 2003 when she was hired at the Laramie post office.

I also asked all of the participants to reflect on how the world in which LGBTQ adolescents are coming of age today has changed since 1998, and how Matthew's murder may have contributed to some of these changes.

Jackie

I know the Rainbow Resource Center on campus didn't exist until after Matt's death, but did Safe Zone? No matter. They're both there to inform, educate, and support our

LGBT friends, families, and community. And how about the Gay-Straight Alliance at the high school? How cool is that to a person who never heard mention of gay until adulthood? I'm especially comforted that young people seem to be more accepting of our differences and are more willing to speak out and act up when they see hate or injustice. I can only hope and pray that this new generation and those of us who lived through those dark days will remember that the best way—the only way—to change hearts and minds is through love, knowledge, understanding, and compassion.

Nicki

I still believe the words I said as a preservice teacher in 1998. I think the work is still so important, and I work with so many other supportive individuals who are equally motivated to the same cause. Teachers, curriculum, administrators—the entire school community has become more aware and accepting of all individuals and more focused on helping the people who were disenfranchised for many reasons. I've worked with so many caring people in schools who want the best for students, who want to end bullying, who want to support and celebrate all students.

I think that teens are way more accepting of LGBTIQ+ youth nowadays. Students feel more comfortable to question their gender and sexual identity and find their true identity. The fact that individuals can feel comfortable to come out in adolescence as transgender, and some of the most popular students at LHS—in Laramie, Wyoming!—are out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, reflects an obvious cultural/societal shift.

I have been saddened by the news lately and by the prevalence of hate-filled language and actions at both the national and local level. However, I have also seen a transgendered student accepted and supported at LHS to the point that she even ran for the school board last year as a freshman in college. Her activism motivates me to

continue to be the counterbalance to hatred and brutality that Matthew initially inspired.

Matthew Shepard was a catalyst for these changes. We have a long way to go toward true acceptance of all, but it is a definitive positive shift inspired by his legacy that I cling to more than the tragedy, as we approach the 20th anniversary of his death.

Jeff

Two years ago (in 2015), my brother disowned me for being gay. He and I were discussing Mike Pence and the Indiana ruling on gay discrimination. My brother essentially told me there is no need to fight—don't we have everything and why are we always pushing our agenda? He told me I should die of AIDS and will die alone and have no true friends. Needless to say, that man is now out of my life, but it highlights that the struggle is still there. If I, at 42, who has been out and proud and haven't hid it for 20 plus years, could have this happen, anyone can.

But, with the new political culture under the current president, the people who have kept quiet are feeling emboldened to speak out. I have been called faggot in my neighborhood by people who are new to D.C. or visiting. So we have to remain vigilant and keep fighting. We can't be quiet. I think we have accomplished so much, but I think in the next four years we have to be very careful and very alert or we could slip. We need to stand and resist.

Jim

Certainly there have been changes here in Laramie, but they're reflected in the rest of our country too. We talk more about hate and violence, and the conversation about GLBTQ rights has moved light years forward from the time of Matt's murder. We have more legal protections, we're no longer on the fringes of society, and people are more likely to feel a connection to someone who is out.

I think Matt helped start this shift; people saw his picture and connected with his story in a way they hadn't before, realizing that "those people" could be their nephew or niece, the neighbor kid down the street, or someone in their own house. Recognizing that hatred against GLBTQ people resulted in such brutality meant that they had to see us as people, that we had inherent worth and dignity, and that it was time to address hate and violence. I think for many, Matt's murder was the first time they started to view GLBTQ rights as being on par with other sorts of civil rights.

Knowing Matt has changed the way I view people. While the differences between us are important parts of our experience and identity, they shouldn't change how I interact with or view others. I'm more skeptical about the media and stories I read or see. I pay more attention to what the news is *not* telling me—the people around the edges of a story, such as the friends, family, classmates, and coworkers of the "main characters." Perhaps most important, I have a better understanding of my own ability to create change in the world around me. Our small and simple response through Angel Action sent a message far wider and more powerful than we ever imagined, and I'm more likely to say "let's do this" rather than "somebody ought to."

Romaine

In some ways being a teenager is easier now than it was when I was a teen. I came out in high school in Dayton, WY. I was the only openly out student at any Wyoming high school that the time, as far as I know. High school was hell in so many ways and not just because of the bullying I faced from my peers. I faced just as many issues from the teachers and other adults. My high school principal once pulled me into his office and explained that when he went to school, they never taught him how to address

the issues of a gay student. He literally told me he had no idea how to help me with the bullying I was facing but he promised to try. We learned how to cope with my life as a gay student together.

In many ways I envy LGBT kids today, but I know they still don't have it easy. I think the most important thing they should know about Matthew is that he believed he could make the world a better place, and he never let any adult make him think otherwise. It was perhaps the most important lesson he taught me. Anybody can change the world; you just have to get out there and do it.

In summer 2016, when Omar Mateen killed 48 people and wounded 59 others at the Orlando gay nightclub Pulse—the deadliest mass shooting in US history—it shocked many of my students, who had been living in an environment where being out and gay had been normalized and supported as they came of age. As mourners prepared for the wave of funerals following the killings, the news came that the Westboro Baptist Church was planning to come and picket (though Fred Phelps had passed away in 2014). As hundreds of other communities had done since that first Angel Action protest in 1999, the Orlando Shakespeare Theatre sprang into action to create costumes for yet another silent demonstration.

What started out as a simple idea of standing up to the hatred of the Westboro Baptist Church has clearly taken on a life of its own. Most people today know about Angel Action because they have seen *The Laramie Project*. But over the years I have gotten hundreds of emails from people who asked to use the Angels to counter protesters in their communities. Many years ago I made the building plans for the wings available on my website and so many angels have gotten their wings because of it. I love seeing how the angels have been used to combat hate. The most recent group to use Angel Action is the theater folks who decided to use the angels as a response to the

Pulse shooting in Orlando. I found the sight of the angels in Orlando to be as beautiful as that April morning in Wyoming all those years ago.

Laramie 20 years later

Laramie remains a complicated and contradictory city located within a still deeply red and equally complex state in the mountain West. On the one hand, as of this writing, there is still no hate crimes legislation at the state level in Wyoming. Yet, in 2009, UW professor Cathy Connolly, the first openly gay faculty member at the University of Wyoming, also became the first ever openly gay member of the Wyoming State Legislature.

There was more success on the local level when in May 2015, the Laramie City Council passed Wyoming's first LGBT anti-discrimination ordinance, by a 7–2 vote. The measure prohibits “discrimination of any person based upon his or her actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity in employment, housing and public accommodations” (City of Laramie n.d. website). Laramie is the first city in Wyoming to implement such a measure and provide a process for gay and transgender people to file a complaint with the City if they believe they have been the subject of discrimination. In commenting on the discussion leading up to the vote, a writer for the *Casper Star Tribute* noted that “Laramie residents and council members recalled the murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998, which brought national attention to the southeastern Wyoming town” (Hancock 2015).

The struggles around LGBTQ rights in Laramie and in Wyoming seems a waltz, one step forward, two back, another to the side, then forward again. At the University of Wyoming, the annual Shepard Symposium for Social Justice, founded in the wake of the murder, is now a program of a larger Social Justice Research Center, made possible by an anonymous endowment in 2002. The first annual Laramie PrideFest took place in June 2017, culminating in a Matthew Shepard candlelight vigil. The statewide LGBT organization, Wyoming Equality, has expanded its activities far beyond the annual Rendezvous campout depicted in the film, providing education, news and information, social events, support for GSAs across the state, and political advocacy.

In April 2017, US Senator Mike Enzi (R-WY) offered a reminder that these “victories” were not typical nor resulting in a dramatic cultural change in Wyoming. When visiting Greybull High School, a student asked Senator

Enzi him how he sees Wyoming's LGBTQ community. He responded with this anecdote:

"I know a guy who wears a tutu and goes to bars on Friday night and is always surprised that he gets in fights. Well, he kind of asks for it" (Riley 2017).

Enzi's response sparked a creative grassroots movement across Wyoming starting with the hashtag #LiveAndLetTutu, a riff on Wyoming's state motto, Live and Let Live. Within days of Enzi's remarks, a wave of creative #LiveAndLetTutu actions erupted across the state, from a family game night at a Cheyenne church, to pub crawls in Laramie, Pinedale, and Sheridan. Tutu-making workshops were organized in advance to help outfit participants. Referring to Shepard's death and the "hate state" criticism leveled at Wyoming in its aftermath, protest organizers Patrick Harrington and Mike Vanata, both of whom live in Laramie, explained the motivation behind #LiveAndLetTutu to Wyoming Public Media: "I'm really upset that Wyoming kind of lives in this dark shadow of a myth that we're just a completely gay-hating state or something. And I think from this action, we're correcting that" (Raper 2017).

The Facebook event page for Laramie's event read:

Let's face it. Senator Enzi made some odd comments about what should happen to a man wearing a tutu in bar. So let's show him we've got nothing to fear!

This Friday, stand in support of Wyoming's LGBT community by wearing a tutu for our Live and Let Tutu Pub Crawl! Drinks discounts will follow!

(Tutu Protest Facebook Page 2018)

Hundreds of Wyomingites shared photos of themselves in tutus on social media, and the story was picked up in the national media. Such stories about LGBTQ issues or events in Wyoming never fail to mention the Shepard murder. Perhaps the distance from the fence in October 1998 to the Live and Let Tutu protest of 2017 marks one measure of progress in LGBTQ visibility, acceptance, and equality in Wyoming. One step forward in that waltz, with the surety that there will likely be a step back or to the side in the near future.

Epilogue

And what of the "end game" for the "characters" in my film? Jim married his partner, Jesse, in 2010, and in August 2017 their four-year-old daughter

started preschool. Romaine and her partner Iris also have a daughter, now 10. Nicki's daughter Alanna, four years old when we began filming *Laramie Inside Out*, has grown up to be an activist like her mom. Father Roger was reassigned to a parish in Kansas City, where he continues to preach "Christ's central message of welcoming all to the table." Jackie, the ultimate PFLAG mom has become the ultimate PFLAG great-grandmother, still taking every opportunity to tell folks how proud she is of her gay son. And, despite her homophobic coworkers at the post office, Mickey continues her barstool activism as a beloved regular at her current hangout, the Third Street Bar & Grill.

In the end, the struggle for LGBTQ rights and equity in Wyoming continues and the echoes of Matthew Shepard's murder explicitly haunt the moment of victory and defeat. And the film I produced and that brought me some closure in my relationship to Laramie—my own personal coda, if you will—has aged gracefully into an historical documentary. Still used in classrooms and screened in community centers but now less as a prompt to activism and more as one perspective—one strand of historical memory—to remind us that what we have gained can be taken away in a heartbeat, to inform this current and future generations of the price some might pay as we continue the struggle for rights—for dignity—for respect—for equity—for citizenship in this suddenly uncertain moment in this nation.