

October 18, 1999

The Tragic Death of Matthew Shepard

Nancy Pelosi

This address was given on the floor of the House of Representatives by Representative Pelosi and printed in the *Congressional Record* for October 18, 1999.

Mr. Speaker, with great sadness I rise to recall that 1 year ago, Matthew Shepard, a gay college student, was murdered. We should all deplore his tragic death. He was a lovely young man and was courageously willing to be open about who he was. He suffered because of who he was. This is simply wrong. It is a tragedy when a young man has the courage to be open about who he is, and his life is taken for it.

Unfortunately, Matthew is not alone. His tragic death and violence toward others point out the need for hate crimes legislation. According to the National Coalition of Anti-Violence programs, in 1998, 33 Americans were murdered because they were gay or lesbian. In the United States last year, there were at least 2,552 reports of anti-gay or lesbian incidents. The number of serious assaults in which victims sustained major injuries grew by 12 percent. How many more deaths, how many assaults on the personal integrity of people, need to happen before this Congress will see the need for hate crimes legislation?

The statistics and Matthew's individual personal story demonstrate that these incidents are not isolated. Harassment of gays, lesbians and bisexuals is not isolated to one geographic area nor to any one factor. As our country knows all too well, hate crimes take many forms and affect many different kinds of victims. We all remember the 1996 horrible murder of James Byrd, Jr., an African-American man in Texas. We all remember earlier this year, when a gunman opened fire at a Jewish Community Center and then singled out an Asian-American and shot him. These harsh stories are troubling and unfortunately, recent shootings are a constant reminder of the hate that still exists in our society.

The Hate Crimes Prevention Act would provide law enforcement officials with needed tools, and would serve as a lasting tribute to the lives of

Matthew Shepard, James Byrd, Jr., and the others who have been victimized by hate crimes. The Hate Crimes Prevention Act would not end all violence against people because they are gay, or African-American, or Jewish, or come from another country. Nonetheless, this legislation would allow the Federal Government to investigate and punish crimes motivated by hate.

The murder of Matthew Shepard is the manifestation of the enduring bigotry that still prevails in our society. Our Nation should take action and pass this responsible legislation which would enable Federal law enforcement officials to fight these crimes and punish the perpetrators.