

EDITORS NOTE: Next week, the U.S. Senate is expected to debate and to vote on the passage of the Matthew Shepard Act as an amendment to the Defense Reauthorization legislation. We do not yet know when or how this may take place, but given the timeliness, we offer this op-ed by Dennis Shepard for your publication on a non-exclusive basis.

For questions or follow up, please feel free to contact Matt Matassa, Communications Director, Matthew Shepard Foundation (www.matthewshepard.org) at 303-830-7400 ext. 14 or on mobile at 303-588-2872. His email is matassa@matthewshepard.org

A Father's Appeal: Choose to Act

By Dennis Shepard

Co-Founder, Matthew Shepard Foundation

Father of Matthew Shepard

When my son Matthew was murdered nearly nine years ago, my family had a decision to make. We could mourn Matthew's death privately - withdrawing into some semblance of seclusion, try to resume our "normal" lives, pretending that nothing had changed...or we could use this tragedy to talk about hate and help make Matthew's murder a wake-up call throughout our country. We made our decision - a choice we consciously and proudly continue to support every day.

Our son died because of hate. He was killed simply because he was gay. For us, our choice was a no-brainer. Not a day goes by that I don't think about Matthew - his spirit, his passion for people, or his smile. And since his death, we have witnessed more acts of hate, bigotry, and injustice against other lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender (LGBT) Americans. For Matthew and all of the other victims, our family has chosen to fight and to act - to speak out against hate, to "come-out" as allies, and to engage ourselves in the process of change.

Some days are harder than others, but I choose to act for the memory of my son. I choose to act for the memories of the thousands of victims of hate crimes. I choose to act for those that don't have the strength or ability to act. I choose to act because we, as a nation, cannot afford not to.

I choose to act because I was, and still am, very proud of my son...of who he was and the struggles he had to overcome to become that man. I choose to act because I never want another LGBT American to go through the fear, the pain, the violence, or the loneliness that Matthew went through on that horrible night. I choose to act because I never want another parent to go through what we went through - the grief, the giant hole in the heart, the bedside vigil, or the realization that holidays, family vacations, and the normal, dull routine of work, home, and life will never, ever be the same.

All of us - gay and straight alike - need to act. Hate affects each and every one of us. It knows no limits, follows no clear set of rules, and has infiltrated our society's most basic institutions. For that reason, I am humbled that the United States House of Representatives has chosen to act, and to do so in Matt's memory, and the United States Senate is poised to follow. They are now taking the first giant steps in making the Matthew Shepard Act the law of our land.

The legislation is simple: to protect people from being attacked, beaten, brutalized, and murdered because of who they are. It's a necessary, measured response to the consequences of hate that took my son away from me and has taken far too many other Americans from those who loved them.

I challenge all of you to follow the example of the House by making the choice to act. Encourage your Senators to vote for the Matthew Shepard Act. Today. Tell your story about how hate has affected your family. Today. Come out as LGBT and allied. Today. **Choose to erase hate. Today!** We all have a responsibility to act. If we don't - who will?

To find out how to contact your senators, please visit www.MatthewShepard.org.