

Aftermath

Beth: The book emerged out of something really unexpected that happened, which was, you know, not too long after Matthew was murdered, I was talking to a very good old friend of mine who's a professor at Wheaton College, in MA.

He was, at the time, the advisor to their Gay and Lesbian student group, and I was the advisor to the GLBT student group here. So, we were talking about what had happened here, and he was telling me that his students were, you know, horrified and devastated by Matt's murder. And, so, his students, and he, ended up inviting me to come talk at Wheaton College.

And, I thought, when I went out there, I thought I was going to be talking to a handful of students and my old friend, Trip Evans. But several hundred people came to the event, and it went on for a couple of hours.

For me, it was my first understanding of how powerful the impact of Matt's murder was outside of Laramie. I mean, I was in Laramie. I was in the thick of it here, but I hadn't really registered what it meant to people. So I just did a little research in preparation for that talk. I talked to some gay activists in the state to get a sense of what it was like to be gay in Wyoming.

Music Break

Beth: You know, on the one hand, I was glad that people were reacting with profound sympathy and horror to his loss, because I felt that said something about progress that we'd made as a culture, you know, towards being able to understand gay people as sympathetic, you know, as people we could identify with.

On the other hand, there were times when I felt that the selection of Matt as the person who came to represent homophobic violence that, you know, that that rode on some things about our culture that aren't so attractive.

I mean, I do think that one of the reasons why many straight people found him sympathetic is because he looked so young, right? So they didn't have to imagine him as a sexual person. They could imagine him as still a child.

It's fair to say that he was more sympathetic, or more . . . he was chosen, I think, by the media in part, because he was white, you know, and didn't challenge other fault lines in our culture. But, that's not to say that people's individual sympathy for him should be questioned or impugned; and it was powerful, just powerful how many people identified with him.

Music Break

Beth: Matt had just joined - because he had just come to the University - he had just joined what at the time was called the LGBTA, and is now called *Spectrum*; but that was the only visible gay presence on campus.

A year or two after Matthew was murdered, the campus created the *Rainbow Resource Center*; but created it, and then didn't fund it, didn't staff it, I mean, I built the shelves for the RRC. It was initially in what was formally a men's bathroom, which was an irony that many of us remarked upon privately, but weren't too impressed by publically.

So, yeah . . . there was very little visible presence, you know, in Wyoming before Matthew died and I think that's one of the things that make life hard for gay and lesbian people in Wyoming.

Not that it's more homophobic here, but just that it is such a rural culture, and such a quiet culture. Such a culture invested in being quiet in so many ways about many controversial subjects, that to be gay here . . . that's what makes it hard, you know, plus what still is the reality of homophobia everywhere in the country. *I do think that's true.*

This may sound cold . . . but there's certain callousness towards these kinds of crimes in other places. I mean, Laramie averages maybe a murder a year. And, so for us here, locally, that murder was horrifying . . . and I also think nationally, yeah, it did stand out.

I mean, as you know, as well as I do, there are dozens of anti-gay murders that happened the year that Matthew died, and that typically happen in this country, and we don't take notice of them. And I think in part, it's because in more urban parts of America, it's almost background noise, which is terrible, but it's true.

Music Break

Beth: Many people in Laramie felt that they had to think about things that they had not wanted to think about before. You know, one of the most extraordinary changes took place in the places that I think many people would assume are the most homophobic precincts of a town like Laramie . . . and that was in the Sheriff's Office and the Police Department where the men, the primary investigators into Matthew's murder, you know they ended up going to Washington DC to speak with the HRC, and to speak on behalf of federal hate crimes law.

And these were men, who before the murder were in no way friends of gay and lesbian people, and gay and lesbian rights. So, I think simply because we had to think about what happened to Matt, individuals made remarkable changes.

Music Break

Beth: He's an extraordinary individual to me. He was the lead detective from the Sheriff's Office on Matthew's murder. And he, you know, Rob is this really tough Wyoming character, and I did a long initial interview with him, and it took me a while to get over my own stereotype of what, you know, what a Wyoming cop would be like.

Because what I had to realize in the course of that interview was how profoundly moved he was and changed by what had happened to Matt.

Matthew was found on . . . well he was attacked on October 6th you know, found the next day, and died on October 12th so; he was in the hospital for a number of days in a coma. And so, Rob went to his hospital room. And, so here he is investigating a murder of somebody who has not yet died.

I mean, he is sitting beside Matt knowing that Matt is going to die, but still able to be there with him. I think, yeah, the emotional impact of that on Rob was profound.

But the amazing thing about Rob; and this is true of Dave O'Malley as well, is that they are also consummate professionals, and so Rob put all of that emotional intensity into a very careful investigation and was deeply invested every step of the way in the investigation.

One of things that triggered Rob's change was, just for the first time, discovering that there was a gay and lesbian community in Laramie that was sometimes afraid. And that especially in the aftermath of Matt's murder, were really afraid.

I think it was a real moment of enlightenment for him; that he thought he was doing a good job and that Laramie was a pretty safe place. But then, here's this entire group of people that he hasn't thought about before who are frightened, and he was not alone in that discovery. So for many of the people that he worked with on the investigation, they became close to people and invested in the safety of people that they had not thought about before, because they had not cared about them before.

That, to me, has always been one of the most moving things about what has happened here.

You know I can be a very cynical professor sometimes, but to watch people who openly admit that they were quite homophobic in the past; to watch them genuinely change and become comfortable talking about something that in the past they would have either laughed at or felt disgust towards, that gives me a lot of hope.

Music Break

Beth: The main arguments you hear in Wyoming against hate crime legislation are the one I think you hear anywhere and they're the "Murder is murder; if you create HC

legislation you're thought policing; or you're singling out certain victims as more valuable or important than others, or you're creating special rights," and all of those things just aren't true.

You know, we have a highly complicated set of laws for punishing violent crime. There all sorts of differences in sentencing, for example, that don't have to do with judgments about the victims' worth . . . that don't have to do with thought policing.

People who support Hate Crimes Legislation, I think, largely, what they're saying is that there certain types of crimes that strike not only against a certain individual, but strike against some of the most deeply held beliefs that our country is founded upon, you know, including equality and the right to individuality, in a sense, the right to be the person you wish to become, you know, to pursue your own happiness.

So crimes that are motivated by a loathing of a person's identity, I mean I think, you know, at its best what HCL wishes to do, is to say, "We as a nation do not approve. We do not approve of acts of violence that strike at the very heart of some of our deepest principles as a country."

Music Break

Beth: I mean, I have often felt here in Laramie, you know, these last 10 years, that what more would it take to convince people that we need to have legislation that protects gay and lesbian people, right, that promotes their equality? What more would it take, right, than Matthew's murder?

I feel like as many people here in Laramie are invested in remembering Matt, as many people are invested in forgetting him.

The thing that makes it so difficult, in a continuing way, to create these kinds of changes, which, as you rightly say; these are political changes connected to civil rights and human rights, it's not anything more complicated than that.

I think that in our culture we are still so uncomfortable about sex and desire across the board that not only do gay and lesbian people, and the straight people who support them, not only do they have to fight against certain political beliefs, but we also have to fight against a profound kind of cultural discomfort, unease, fear, about sexual desire more broadly, and so that makes it hard. That makes it hard.

And I don't know. I don't believe in some story of inevitable progress. I think people invested in this issue have to stay vigilant and have to keep fighting because the backsliding happens pretty quickly and straight people's desire to forget people like Matthew endures.