Show plays a role in education

Gay student hopes "Project" will stir dialogue.

By MYRA GOTTI
Scene Editor

Imagine you have a secret. It's a powerful secret — the kind that could make your best friend or your parents turn away from you. This sort of secret could get you killed.

Members of minority groups are automatic targets for hate, regardless of who they are as individuals. For people who are gay, minority status carries a heavy burden. Their sexuality is a secret and exposing this secret can be dangerous.

"Hate speech is the beginning of a long road," Catherine O'Neill, Business senior and president of the Gay-Straight Alliance, said. "It may not seem like much, but words lead to actions."

Actions that have prejudice toward certain groups are hate crimes. According to the FBI, 14 percent of all hate crimes in 2005 were motivated by sexual orientation.

Of this 14 percent, about 1,171 crimes, or 86.9 percent, targeted gay men. This would be the same if more than half of the freshmen class was verbally or physically assaulted.

In 1998, one hate crime drew national attention. On a cold October night in Laramie, Wyo., two men attacked Matthew Shepard, 21. Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson left the bar with Shepard, drove him out to a field and beat him unconscious. Shepard, a student at the University of Wyoming, was left tied to a fence to die.

Wesley Pourier, Arts & Sciences junior, identifies with Shepard, because he is also gay. Pourier is a cast member of "The Laramie Project," which is a play about the events surrounding Matthew Shepard's death.

"We all grew up in the time when this incident happened, so it's kind of a part of our background as children of this age," Pourier said. "So I was aware of [Matthew], and when I came across this play, I read it and I felt like it was saying everything that needs to be said about this issue."

His sexuality is one of the reasons why Pourier was drawn to the show. He came across the show when he was a sophomore in high school.

"It deals with the love that needs to be there for this kind of hatred to end," Pourier said. "They even say in the show that this town could be any main drag of America. To see how this town deals with it is strong, and I felt like it was something I wanted to bring in front of a large audience and show them how love can come from hate."

Pourier said he feels that's important for him as a gay man to portray some of the people involved and show how they deal with the hatred. His favorite role is Aaron Kriefels, the boy who found Shepard, because he strongly identifies with him.

"He deals a lot with the question 'why did I have to be the one to find him?' The exact line is 'why did God want me to find him?' and it goes into the whole thing of being Catholic and a gay man," Pourier said. "It's the question of why God wanted me to be gay. Maybe there's a reason for it. In the end he [Aaron] finds his reason, so I identify with him for all of that."

Creighton follows the policy of the Catholic Church, which O'Neill interprets as saying "you are who you are, but you shouldn't act on it."

"I think Creighton is a complex situation," O'Neill said. "It's better than state schools because of the Jesuit values for mutual respect, but on the other hand, it's worse than some public schools because the average student is from the Midwest, from smaller conservative areas. They just don't have the exposure to different people."

Alan Klem, director of "The Laramie Project," said that he doesn't openly discuss students' sexuality.

"When I cast people, I don't care [what their orientation is]," Klem said. "Certainly the play deals with homosexuality, but there's more to it than that."

About his role, Pourier said, "if anything I hope it will get people to start talking. Dialogue brings change. And I feel like this show is going to open up a lot of dialogue about an issue that we basically avoid on our campus."

This dialogue is essential to teach people about homosexuality, Pourier said. People often fear what they don't understand, and fear leads to hate. O'Neill said that people often don't see the people they hate as human beings.

"The thing is, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson thought 'Oh, he's not a person. He's a fag,'" O'Neill said. "Then it's OK to beat him up and leave him tied to a fence."

In the midst of this hope for dialogue and change are rumors. The Rev. Fred Phelps and his followers may come to the opening of the show to protest. Phelps actively protests homosexuality all over the country. Pourier said that if Phelps does come, it will just be feeding into the promotion of the show.

"I feel like the show itself is doing exactly what Fred Phelps doesn't want done, which is educating people," Pourier said. "Reacting to him is only fueling his fire."

"If there's no one to watch them, they don't win," O'Neill said.

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Wesley Pourier, Arts & Sciences junior, kneels in silent prayer in front of other castmates of "The Laramie Project." Pourier, who is gay, portrays a variety of people in the show. About Pourier's sexuality, Catherine O'Neill, Business senior and president of the Gay-Straight Alliance said, "I think he's like most people. It's not the thing that defines him, but it's important."