

LTCC 'Laramie Project' actors struggle with difficult topic

By Susan Wood

When South Shore actor Rhonda Keen considers the "Laramie Project" opening next weekend at Lake Tahoe Community College, the local production hits home on many fronts.

The stirring docu-drama to be performed at Duke Theatre from March 12-14 and March 18-21 was introduced by the New York Tectonic Theatre and writer-director Moises Kaufman as a result of 400 hours of interviews of the citizens of Laramie, Wyo. The town was scarred after Matthew Shepard was brutally tortured, tied to a fence and left to die because of his sexual orientation. It left the community struggling with its differing beliefs, questions and ultimate transformation.



Chris Taylor
as Rulon
Stacey, CEO of
Ivinson
Hospital where
Matthew
Shepard was
taken, at a
press
conference on
Sheperd's
condition.

Photo/Pat
Leonard-
Heffner

The murder at the hands of two men Shepard met at a bar made national headlines 12 years ago and led to landmark hate crime legislation signed by President Obama last October. The Matthew Shepard Act is intended to provide \$5 million in funding to combat hate crimes, which according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, nudged upward in 2008 to claim 9,691 victims. More than 1,700 were attributed to sexual orientation.

Ironically, the day after National Coming Out Day – which was founded to recognize gay equality a decade to the month before the horrific crime – Shepard died in a hospital in Fort Collins, Colo.

Keen was living in Fort Collins in 1998 when the hate crime occurred.

“That’s what got me about the ‘Laramie Project’,” she said.

Keen is no stranger to the type of tragedy that leads to discussions of social justice and the human condition. She grieved with the family of a friend, one of 13 who died in April 1999 during the horrendous shooting massacre at Columbine High School, her alma mater of 1993.

When she thought of Matthew Shepard’s mother, Judy, dealing with such a horrible tragedy, she choked up.

“It’s hell to watch a parent who’s lost a child. I can’t imagine what it’s like to have the murder of her son enacted every night,” Keen said, her voice quivering.

If she could say anything to Judy Shepard, she told *Lake Tahoe News* it would be: “We just want you to know your son was loved and is still loved, and the world and I appreciate the work he

has done for the cause. It's from this cause that the faith in humanity is able to carry on."

When the gay rights activist mother was visiting South Lake Tahoe in 2005 for a gay ski week, she told this reporter in an exclusive interview that she misses Matthew immensely and gets up every morning to try to think of a new way she can tell her son's story so this does not happen again. She called on the local and global community for a united front against hate.

Despite the March 19 planned protest, first reported by *Lake Tahoe News* on Feb. 24, by hate advocates of the Westboro Baptist Church led by the Rev. Fred Phelps of Topeka, Kansas, local organizers and advocates like Keen believe the "Laramie Project" may create that united front Judy Shepard spoke of five years ago when she was here.

A counter protest by local advocates of gay rights is slated for that night.

A candlelight vigil to promote non-violence is planned at 9:30 the next night following the show.

Keen, a self-proclaimed gay rights activist for years, has witnessed the transformation of her family since her cousin underwent serious life challenges after coming out as gay.

"It's good to watch people's eyes open. And since the cast knew each other, it was neat to watch people open up to view the different ideas," she said. "This is the type of piece that you hope to get to do as an actor, but don't always get to. This is what good theater is all about – promoting social justice," she said, calling the play a mental workout.

"I would feel drained by it, but usually got energy from it," she said of rehearsals.

The 10 actors perform 70 roles in the play, with Keen jumping from playing the town minister's wife to a friend of one of

the convicted murderers, Aaron McKinney.

For the actors, rehearsals scheduled three times a week have culminated in a catharsis of crying, then healing as they've overcome some of the hateful lines being said on stage.

"(We, as actors,) have to distance ourselves (from those words)," she said. "Some of the things the minister is saying I've heard in church," she added.

From the seasoned to growing

Another local actor, Ethan Nivan, can relate somewhat to Keen's experience, though she has at least a decade of years on him.

Nivan, at age 20, had never heard of the Matthew Shepard murder, but knows all too well what it means to be a target of an incident of hate. Nivan recalled being attacked by a football team for his perceived sexual orientation as a senior at South Tahoe High School.

"It brought up and fed my own emotional strife from my past," said Nivan, who will also serve on a hate/tolerance panel at Lake Tahoe Community College following the March 14 matinee.

Not only has Nivan been affected by hate, he found it challenging to play the town's minister.

"A lot of the characters we play say words that are not even in my vocabulary. It was rough to hear and hard for a lot of the first week (in rehearsals)," he said.

Nonetheless, Nivan considers the play a powerful growing experience.

"I've never done anything like it and probably will never do anything like it again," he said.

A coming together

Having met doing productions in college, longtime South Lake Tahoe actors Chris and Pamela Taylor noted how this experience brings a level of depth to their drama careers and life as a couple.

Pamela Taylor described the difficulty in changing an entire thought process from one role to another on a dime. Even the subtle wardrobe changes are so sudden, they occur on the stage.

She plays the mother of an officer who responded to the scene of Shepard's beating and lashing. From there, she jumps to the first lesbian to come out at the University of Wyoming where Shepard went to school.

"This production takes a great amount of concentration having to develop and enrich a character as we go along. There are more than 10 actors (playing these roles). It's a community of a whole group of people in a courtroom during the arraignment," Taylor said. "This is life. If this show does not evoke emotion in the audience members, then maybe there's no emotion in them. We live in a community with a variety of people. It's not about what your beliefs are. It's what you've done with your beliefs."

And Taylor believes the protesters working under the auspices of www.godhatesfags.com have a right to speak out, regardless of how far on the other end of the spectrum of beliefs they fall from hers.

"Their lives must be very small – a pathetic group of people that would rather spend time traveling to hold up a sign in a protest of hate than stay home and love their families," she said.

It's the third time director Susan Boulanger has put on the play and believes there's still a vital need for the message of love and tolerance of your fellow man to get out.

"It's about what kind of community we want to be," she said, also referring to having moved here and being touched by this town's heartfelt parade of love and support six months ago to kidnapping survivor Jaycee Lee Dugard of South Lake Tahoe.

Boulanger said she was especially struck by Shepard's story as a result of a violent crime.

"The men who did this were not representative of their community. The play goes into the facts of the case and includes the confessions of the killers," she said, adding the play revolves around the New York theater company going out to Laramie to find out how the citizens coped with the tragedy.

Tickets for the Laramie Project go on sale at LTCC's theater box office on Tuesday. They cost \$7 for general admission, \$5 for seniors and children, and \$4 for LTCC student body cardholders. LTCC advises that mature subject matter may not be suitable for children younger than 15.