

Play provokes frank discussion of hate in Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

Laramie, Wyoming, and South Lake Tahoe, California, have more in common than the latter would probably like to admit.

The populations are about the same. Both are small Western towns. Both have snowcapped mountains to look at this time of year. One relied on the railroad and now mostly ranching, the other had logging and now tourism as the economic heartbeat.



Panelists discuss "The Laramie Project" and hate in South Lake Tahoe on Sunday.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

Hate crimes is the sinister link.

Laramie, for what two men did in Matthew Shepard in 1998. They beat him to death because he was gay.

South Lake Tahoe, for what a local couple did to two tourists in 2007. Last week they were convicted of the brutal beating

of the Indian-American man at El Dorado Beach.

Hatred is alive in Lake Tahoe. Ethan Niven has been a victim for years. It started when he was a freshman at South Tahoe High School. At 20, the homosexual taunts have continued in town.

He and six others were part of a panel discussion Sunday after the matinee performance of "The Laramie Project" at Lake Tahoe Community College.

(The play is based on how the town of Laramie dealt with Shepard's killing.)

Joining Niven were Robert Autre and Alisa Bindel, both of the South Lake Tahoe Police Department; Lisa Utzig-Schafer of South Lake Tahoe Women's Center; businessman and City Councilman Jerry Birdwell; FBI agent Chris Champion; and Matt Huckabay with the Center for Violence Free Relationships in Placerville.

"I was scared to try out for this play," Niven, who is a student at LTCC, told the audience. He and the nine other actors each play a variety of roles.

Champion pointed to 2004 when Nazi graffiti littered Temple Bat Yam.

"We don't want to think it happens in our community and it does," Champion said of hate crimes.

Birdwell spoke of how when he was appointed as a judge in Texas that he and his partner had security living with them because they were openly gay. Death threats were multiple. Property was destroyed. Their home and work picketed.

"In 1969, when I started practicing law the hate in Dallas, Texas, was tremendous. We made progress just by working," Birdwell said. "People were afraid of losing their jobs and they still are. When we moved here we didn't see the

hatred.â€

Much of the afternoonâ€™s discussion, with input from those in attendance, centered on the need for education inside and outside of the classroom.

â€Think about the power of community. The bottom line is it really isnâ€™t about being right, but the values we share as a community,â€ Huckabay said. â€We can all agree it is not OK for kids to be unsafe at school.â€

Utzig-Schafer spoke of the curriculum she takes into the schools, with this being the first school year an 11-week segment on violence is being taught to freshmen.

Niven didnâ€™t have anything good to say about how his situation was handled at the high school â€ by staff, administration or law enforcement.

Alex Boyar, a friend of Nivenâ€™s who was in the audience, spoke to the need for educating youth as prevention so laws like the federal Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Hate Crime Act that was passed in October donâ€™t have to be used by prosecutors.

Apparently the education needs to start at the college. Unbeknownst to director Susan Boulanger until after Saturday nightâ€™s performance was a group of LTCC students taunting the actors.

Utzig-Shafer said that as enthusiastic as students are with what she has to teach, it has to continue at home.

â€You need to talk to your kids. There are a lot of things going on at the high school,â€ she said.

Huckabay said, â€Education is key, but we have to educate ourselves. If you really care, then you have to get involved otherwise the status quo continues.â€

A white South Tahoe High School sophomore attending the play said he believes Hispanic students get more help with harassment.

To this, Autre said, "Our officers try to be racially sensitive."

Jen Gurecki, an attendee, asked what was going to be done about the planned protest on March 19 by the Kansas Westboro Baptist Church followers.

The college has hired a police officer to be on duty. Peaceful protests are in the works starting at 7pm March 19. Campion said he doubts they'll show, but said the First Amendment protects their right to protest the play. Huckabay called it an opportunity.

"The best thing is to fill this theater," Huckabay said. "The thing you can do is be proactive. Have fun with them. It's not new to use religion as a tactic to keep people down and oppressed. Show them the hypocrisy."

A candlelight vigil is planned for March 20 following the performance.

"The Laramie Project" will be at the Duke Theatre at LTCC in South Lake Tahoe on March 18, 19, 20 at 7:30pm and March 21 at 2pm.