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Campolindo's Production of The Laramie Project Encourages Dialogue

By Lou Fancher

It's a tragic sign of the times that the term "hate crime" needs little definition. From lynchings in our country's history to the horror of September 11th, 2001 to the fatal beating of Matthew Shepard in Wyoming in 1998, Americans have seen what happens when anger, fear and prejudice lead to violence.

But the reasons behind the crimes-and the reverberations that paralyze communities who suffer them-are less familiar territory.

The Laramie Project, a play and film written by Tectonic Theater Project to tell the story of the people in the small, Wyoming town after Shepard's murder has been seen by more than 50 million people worldwide.

On April 22nd and 23rd, Campolindo High School's drama department will bring the production to the stage.

"It's not just a play about what happened to a gay kid. It's about how the community reacts to being looked at through a national lens of judgment," explained Jamie Donohoe, director of Campolindo's Drama Department.

Donohoe still remembers the media attention around the killing of a Miramonte cheerleader in 1986.

"I was a Campo student. All of a sudden Lamorinda had to look at itself through the articles in Rolling Stone and other media. Even as an adult, I've seen how the community reacts when race, sexuality, religion-or whether we put in a Dollar Tree store-comes up. We have a hard time talking about these non-black-and-white issues," he concluded.

Donohoe has heard nothing but positive reaction to his choice for the spring show. He admitted it could push some people's buttons, but considers the community "smart" and the students talented enough to carry off the play's raw, complex content.

"I chose the play with two goals," Donohoe said, "letting young kids really do some strong acting and pushing themselves is first. A kid's going to step outside of his skin to imagine what it would feel like to be in another person's shoes. And second, if we can get the audience to think about it: what is homosexuality? My hope is that people will talk honestly. More than changing perceptions, it's the talking that I hope will happen."

Nicholas Morrill, Shannon Sullivan, Adam Roth and Laura Zenoni were eager to talk about their participation in the production and the issue of acceptance.

None of the four Campolindo drama students had heard Matthew Shepard's story before being introduced to the play. But they were all quite familiar with homophobic intolerance on their school's campus.

"We must hear the phrase 'That's so gay,' about 100 times a day. It's usually not used to hurt a gay person-because the word has taken on its own meaning. Basically, it means stupid, unfair, flamboyant, negative," Sullivan said.

Donohoe, who has had students talk to him about their sexuality because they do not feel safe and former students tell him how bitter they are for the lie they lived while at Campolindo, was less certain of the term's diluted impact.

"Being gay is not okay in America," he insisted. "It's not okay in Northern California. The term 'gay' is still thrown around on this campus as a derogatory term."

"I'm on a mission to change that," threw in Morrill. "It's breeding unnecessary violence: I can't even see the logical argument behind the hatred."

Roth agreed, adding that people in the Lamorinda community live in "a bubble" and homosexuality is "not an open table discussion here."

Zenoni has felt the urge to examine her Catholic upbringing more closely. She has searched to understand Biblical teachings on the issue and said playing the girlfriend of one of the murderers has been eye-opening.

"She's in this terrible situation. Seeing how horrible her life is; it makes mine look not so bad," she said.

When Zenoni recalled participating in "Day of Silence" activities meant to promote peace and acceptance on campus, all four students voiced anxiety.

"The Gay-Straight Alliance no longer exists (at Campolindo). People would throw stuff-water bottles and trash-at us. They'd laugh," Zenoni remembered.

It might surprise an older generation, but the students agreed that being labeled 'bi-sexual' is far preferable to 'homosexual.'

"People are more accepting because if you like boys and girls, you're okay-you're more 'normal,'" explained one student.

"The coolest part [about the Laramie Project] is that we're addressing the issue," Roth said. "It's revolutionary."

Sullivan, although worried about parental reactions, admitted, "I like that we're rubbing it in people's faces. We're saying 'Hey! It's not okay to have this intolerance.'"

Morrill, taking an actor's perspective, said, "Getting to the emotion and understanding how someone who doesn't agree with homosexuality is touched by what happened to Shepard is more difficult than anything I've ever done."

Donohoe had the last word before heading back into rehearsal: "What's cool about the Laramie Project is that it presents people as honestly struggling with hard issues. My hope is that people will see that you don't have to have the right answer. Having the dialogue is the important part."

The Laramie Project

Shows are April 22nd at 7:00 p.m. and April 23rd at 1:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. in the Campolindo

Performing Arts Center.

Tickets: \$5 for students and seniors, \$10 for adults, available online at the Campolindo web-store, <http://campolindo.revtrak.net/tek9.asp>.

Another Perspective

One young man, whose parents did not want us to identify him by name, spoke with us briefly about his experience being a gay student at Campolindo last year; he is currently enrolled at a different school.

"No one really liked to talk to me," he began. "People stared when I walked by, and many avoided me. Not everyone at school was like that, but the majority was. It was subtle - having grown up in this 'safe' community, it was eye-opening to see that people really are like this, that they really can't accept that someone who is gay could be normal. I didn't feel picked on, just excluded - I was an outsider who would never fit in. I never had a day when I didn't feel judged."

What does the phrase "that's so gay" mean to you?

"That the word 'gay' is used as an insult speaks volumes. The word 'gay' does not mean 'stupid, unfair, flamboyant, or negative.' It's offensive even if it's meant differently. In the dictionary, the definitions of 'gay' are 'merry (etc);' and 'homosexual - there's nothing in there about being stupid. But I think of myself as a human being, not as a word."

Do you feel the school did anything to change the unfriendly environment?

"They tried to a certain extent, but it's hard to change attitudes; had there been more openly gay students things might have been different. But why would we come out? Kids are called 'fag' if they're not athletic - we're being pushed back into the closet. Students' opinions are shaped by their parents, their friends, and their intolerant religions. It's no different than judging others based on skin color or religious preference. I can't change what I am and I will not apologize for it."

What do you think of the choice to present The Laramie Project?

"It's positive that the school is presenting this play. Having the dialogue is the first step towards change; but the change has to follow. People here need to pop their bubbles and deal with reality - gay people are part of the world and we are not going away."

L.Borrowman

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