

Story of Laramie reflects 'Lesson'

College and high school students raise awareness about gay discrimination with theater performance, "Lessons from Laramie"

Karlin Johnson
Feature Editor

As a stand against social injustice, several local college and high school students have come together to produce a shortened version of the play, "The Laramie Project," which they will be performing at Oregon City High School this Friday, May 13.

"The Laramie Project" comes from the true story of Matthew Sheppard, a gay University of Wyoming student who was tied to a fence and brutally beaten by two of his peers, later leading to his death. In 1998 the Tectonic Theater Project went to Matthew's home town of Laramie, Wyoming, and conducted over 200 interviews with the people living in the town. The play is basically a compilation of the actual interviews.

"After the last election I was angry at myself for not being more involved, and really disappointed with the people of Oregon [for voting yes on Measure 36]," said Danielle Scott, the play's director, "and I was trying to find a way where I could make a statement."

Scott, a former librarian at Gladstone HS who has directed plays there, brought her idea to one other person, and soon many came to her asking to be a part of the production. The cast includes four students from here at Clackamas as well as students from the University of Oregon, Lewis and Clark College and Gladstone High School.

"It just seemed like a social justice issue that I could get involved with," said Clackamas student Shad Downey. "It's something that I could do, it's one of the outlets that I could use."

The extremely passionate group has decided to call themselves the Speak for H.O.P.E. theater project, H.O.P.E. standing for Healing, Openness, Peace and Equality.

The original three-hour script was



Photos by Karlin Johnson Clackamas Print

ABOVE: At a recent rehearsal for "Lessons from Laramie," a play based on "The Laramie Project," student actors rehearse a scene about a medical update. RIGHT: Gladstone High School student Misty Downey and Clackamas student Elise Olsen rehearse a scene as two of Matthew Sheppard's peers.



shortened to about an hour performance, so that it could be performed in schools and other various venues more conveniently. The group also added personal testimonies and a series of myths and facts about homosexuals to the end of their performance, and decided to call their version of the play "Lessons from Laramie."

"I find [that acting is] a good medium to make a difference," said Gladstone student David Havens. "I feel that there needs to be a difference in the way social justice works, as in the discrimination of people, whether it be homosexuals or racially or ethnically or religious."

The cast hopes that people will come to see the production and leave with changed hearts.

"I hope that people will see that there's a group of people that really care strongly about an issue like this," said Gladstone student Misty Downey.

Some cast members hope that audience members will come into this and change just as they did.

"I'm hoping that other people that have the same views that I did, that

maybe were raised in church and taught that God hates gays, are going to see that that's not the case," said Olsen. "That's a big thing for me, for people that thought the same way that I did—that they weren't homophobic—to realize after they've seen this that they are."

For some the intent is much simpler.

"[I think we are] just promoting tolerance at worst and acceptance at best," said Shad Downey.

Since the script is based on interviews with real people, the characters range from conservative Christians, to Matthew's peers, to his family members, leaving the show very open for audiences to relate to.

"I think that [Matthew's story is] really sad, but it's something that everyone can connect to," said Gladstone student Misty Downey. "Some people may think that it's all about supporting gays and stuff, but it's about supporting people. It's something that can effect a lot of people's lives no matter what you think."

Members of the cast have also been able to connect to the play,

including Clackamas student Elise Olsen, who was able to relate to a character in the play that evolves by the end, becoming accepting of homosexuals.

"When we read it for the first time, I really connected to Jedediah Shultz," said Olsen. "That's exactly who I was, like his whole transformation; that was exactly what I said to Danielle, 'I don't hate gay people, I just don't agree with it,'—everything that [the character] says. [Then how he is] at the end of the play, that's how I feel now."

Though the cast has not yet had their first performance, they have already experienced what they had hoped to through the changes in themselves.

"I think that we've already hit some things that I'm pretty happy about," said Scott. "A lot of [cast members'] views have changed on

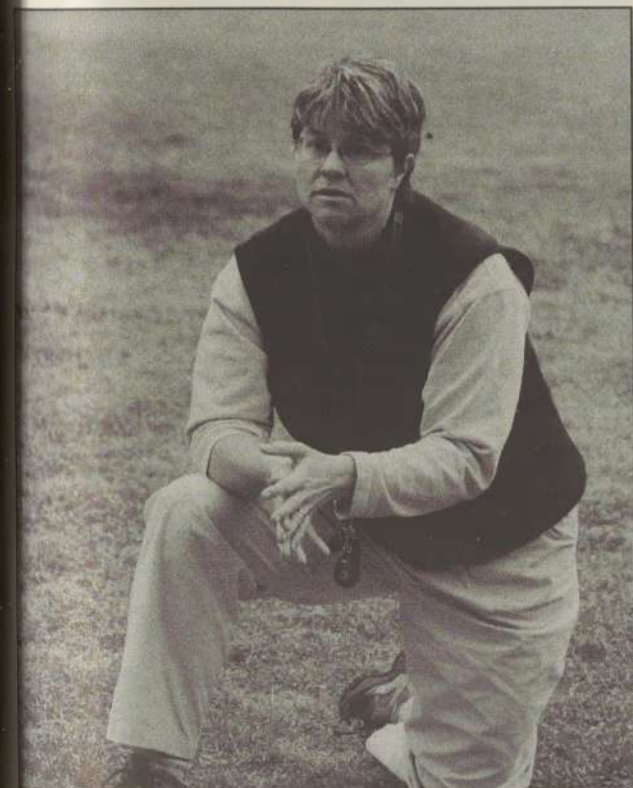
this. After that I think that if one person changed their mind then we did something good."

The performance this Friday will be at 7:30 p.m. and admission is free.

Aside from this first performance, the group is working on getting a show booked at the University of Oregon on May 21, and is also working with Clackamas' Rainbow Club to get a show booked here on campus.

"Things happen in your life when you really need them," said Scott. "I have seen some really good sides of people and seen people committed to something where they don't get anything. They aren't getting paid; they aren't getting praise; they just think it's really important, and so at the end of the day when I'm finished with 'Laramie' [practice], I think humanity is good—and that's really a good place for me to be."

Love of nature the basis behind Instructor Bown's teaching



Max Porter Contributed photo

Biology Instructor Jennifer Bown is a favorite among students, using her incredible passion for biology to draw them in.

Laura Cameron
The Clackamas Print

Anyone involved in the Science department at Clackamas probably knows Biology Instructor Jennifer Bown. She is a favorite among her students, and it's easy to see why.

This Spring Break, those who went on the annual Death Valley trip got to experience firsthand her enthusiasm, her love of biology, her great sense of humor, and her seemingly endless supply of energy—when students dragged themselves out of their tents at 5:30 in the morning, they were usually greeted by Bown's excited, "Come on, guys! We've got lots to do today!"

Of course, Bown is probably used to the routine of Death Valley by now; she has helped lead Clackamas' trip since 1994, and led similar trips from Reno for four years before that. Her love of biology dates back much further than that, however.

"My whole life I've loved animals," she explained. "Every vacation as a child, we had to hit the zoo or the aquarium. It's been a passion."

That passion is quite evident in her teaching. It's not very often that one finds teachers who are so excited by their own material, but those

who have had such teachers know that they are often the finest kind; one gets swept up in their enthusiasm without really realizing it.

Down in Death Valley, Bown was the one scrambling up the hillside to see the rattlesnake, leading late-night scorpion hunts with UV lamps and telling stories of eating chuckwallas and swimming with pup fish. Back in the classroom, she fills her curriculum with real-world experiences and stories.

"People need to be able to connect to the material in their own way," she said. "Of course, being high-energy and motivated helps, too!"

It may surprise some to know that Bown didn't start out planning to be a teacher.

"Originally, I thought I'd be a field biologist," she said. "But then I sort of fell into teaching in graduate school, and I really enjoyed it."

So what happened to doing field work?

"Oh, I still enjoy field work, and with field classes you get to do both," she said. "Now I think if I'd been a field biologist, I'd have gone crazy! I like people too much to spend a year in the forest. I'm a people person."

This is also obvious to anyone who knows Bown, and she's made an impression on more people than

just her students.

"Jen is really enthusiastic and loves what she does," observed Geology instructor and fellow Death Valley leader Sarah Hoover. "She's great with working with students and helping them understand the subject. As a colleague, too, she's always there to point you in the right direction."

Bown's also more than just a teacher; an avid skier, she also enjoys windsurfing, rock climbing, and bird watching—plus a little gardening, when she can find the time. She also loves to just sit and talk, trading stories, gossip and bad jokes. She has a very warm, open personality, which adds a great deal to the connections between her and her students.

"She is life-enriching; a friend among teachers," said student Angela Martindale.

Indeed, whether she's chasing lizards, identifying birds, lecturing on desert plants or just sitting around the campfire and having a laugh, Jennifer Bown is a real and unique treasure. She inspires both students and staff, and brings life to a subject that a friend once described as "nothing but stuffed hunting trophies and too much Latin."

"She's the best teacher I've ever had," student Francine Dodson stated firmly. "Ever."