



ANTHONY RUSSO

BEING GAY IN SMALL TOWN AMERICA

BY BETTY DOVER

I grew up in a small town in the mountains of North Carolina. I am the youngest of eight children and the only lesbian in my family. I lived in Cherokee for 26 years and then I moved to Portland, Oregon. Living in Portland gave me the opportunity to finally feel safe enough to admit that I am a lesbian. I did not feel safe to admit this fact while I was in North Carolina; because a certain member of my family made comments about how "someone needs to take a machine gun to the gay community of San Francisco," which made it hard and scary for me to "come out" there.

While researching my topic (for Clatsop Community College) I came across some extreme cases of "small town homophobia." One such case was that of Brandon Teena who was born a female named Teena Brandon, but believed herself to be male. Brandon was born in Lincoln, Nebraska. He moved to the nearby town of Humboldt in 1993, just after starting his life as a man. Brandon was in the process of preparing for a sex reassignment surgery.

The fact that Brandon was a female was found out and released to the *Falls City Journal* by the Falls City sheriff's office, after he was arrested for a misdemeanor charge of check forgery. One week later, on Christmas Day 1993, Brandon was assaulted and raped at a Christmas party by two men identified as John Lotter and Marvin Thomas Nissen.

Two weeks after Brandon's name was released to the paper Lotter and Nissen murdered him, Lisa Lambert and Philip DeVine (friends of Brandon) in a Nebraska farmhouse, for no other reason but to keep Brandon quiet about the rape. Unfortunately for Lisa Lambert and Philip DeVine, they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Lotter was sentenced to death and Nissen made a deal for a life in prison sentence.

Another extreme case of homophobia is that of a young man in his early 20s named Matthew Wayne Shepard. On October 6, 1998, Matthew met Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney in a bar that was known to be a homosexual hangout. He left with them and they drove to the edge of town to an open field. It was here that Henderson tied Matthew to a fence post and McKinney beat him within an inch of his life. They left him there to die.

Matthew was tied to the fence post for 18 hours before two motorcyclists found him. He was flown by helicopter to Poudre Valley Hospital, which is 90 miles south in Fort Collins, Colorado. On October 12, 1998, Matthew Shepard died from his injuries.

Matthew had a very promising future in front of him. He was a political science student and had devoted his life to fighting for human rights. He spent most of his life traveling around the world with his dad.

I had an opportunity to speak with Jenny Newton, the drama instructor at Astoria High School, about the school's production of the *Laramie Project*, which is the story of Matthew Shepard and his death. I asked Jenny why she chose to do

The Laramie Project. She said that at the time there were some talented actors at the school and that the project was unbiased and theatrically sound. She said the play was very well accepted in the community; however there was one letter of complaint, but the person had not read nor knew what the play was about.

Jenny Newton mentioned seeing changes in the school and has noticed more compassion from the kids towards other kids who may be homosexual. The students realized something like what happened to Matthew Shepard could happen here as well unless someone put a light on it and stopped homophobia.

I looked through some old *Oregonian* articles and found examples of gay-bashing in the Portland area. A few of these cases are as follows:

"Victims describe attacks by groups of young thugs wielding bats and knives. A series of brutal gay-bashing incidents in Laurelhurst Park during the last two months has shocked the city's gay community and brought attention to a stream of anti-gay violence plaguing the Portland area..."

"Men who have gone to the Southeast Portland Park alone late at night have been attacked by groups of young men wielding bats and knives and yelling anti-gay slurs, police and several victims said. The victims of the beatings have been stabbed, cut, kicked and punched, and the attackers have left without being seen or identified, they said..."

"In a January 20 incident, a gang of four men used a broken bottle and a knife to stab, cut and beat a man. The men yelled, 'kill the faggot' during the attack, victim Robert Manning said. Manning is recovering and home from multiple cuts, which required 40 stitches..."

"On Christmas Day, a 32 year old Portland State University student was attacked by two men in the park and beaten with a club. The man had to have 35 stitches around his mouth and ears, and missed two weeks of work because of his injuries. 'I was really quite lucky' to survive, said the man, who asked that he not be identified for fear of additional attacks..."

"On the evening of December 14, two women were attacked and beaten by three men in a downtown parking lot at SW Stark and 2nd Avenue. The men called them names during the attack and left them unconscious, with broken teeth, cuts and injured ribs, one of the victims said..."

"From May 1988 to May 1989, the Metropolitan Human Rights Commission received eight reports of gay-targeted violence, including three beatings, a telephoned bomb threat at a gay hot line, intimidation with a knife, two death threats and an incident in which the head of a dog was left on the porch of a gay man's home in Northeast Portland. These and other hate crimes against gay Oregonians are part of a growing backlash against gays around the country, according to Kevin Berrill, director of the anti-violence project of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force. In 1988, the task force received more than 7,000 reports of documented hate crimes, almost four times the number received in 1985, Berrill said. The 1988 reports included 70 homicides..."

Not all homophobia is this extreme. I talked to a couple of gay and lesbian people here in Astoria and they said they had

encountered only mild forms of homophobia. Out of respect to the individuals with whom I spoke, and to their partners, I will not be giving their names.

The woman I spoke with has lived in Astoria for 20 years and says she has been discriminated against a few times. One such incidence was that she was forced to change jobs because of her sexual preference. Back in the 1980s and 1990s when there were a lot of anti-gay ballot measures, she voiced her opinions by writing letters to the editor of the local newspaper. After doing so she received phone calls telling her that they (the callers) wished she would die.

The gentleman I spoke with has lived in the United States as well as overseas. When living abroad he faced no discrimination; however, while living in the U.S. he has faced mild forms of homophobia such as being called a "fag." He told me that he has not experienced any discrimination in Astoria. He has been fortunate enough to have a very good job and is well liked by all who know him.

I have lived in Astoria since May 27, 2002, and I do not hide the fact I am a lesbian. I have not experienced any forms of discrimination due to my sexual preference. Of course I do not go out except to attend classes at Clatsop Community College. The friends I have are mostly heterosexuals and do not have a problem with me. I am sure that if I were to face any form of discrimination my friends would stand up for me and my rights.

If we can put a light on the sometimes fatal consequences of homophobia, maybe, just maybe, we can stop the violence and spare families the grief of losing a loved one. I have been fortunate that my family and friends accept me for who I am. The family member I spoke of earlier has had a change of mind and accepts me as a member of our family.

"I grew up in Cherokee, North Carolina, the youngest of eight children. I am the only member of my family to ever go to college. I have lived in Oregon for the past 16 years. I started attending Clatsop Community College in September 2002 by taking the Lives in Transition class. After graduating from that program I enrolled in classes. I enrolled in WR270, which is Literary Publications; it allows students to work on the only literary magazine the college puts out called *Rain*. I realized I like the process of putting the magazine together. Our final for the term was to create our own magazine and put it together for a grade. I came up with an idea; I went to the inter-net and researched my idea. I could not find what I was looking for. So I created my own magazine and named it *Bound for Freedom*. *Bound for Freedom* is a collection of poems, short stories and artwork by women who are incarcerated at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville, Oregon.

I wrote "Being Gay in Small Town America" for my WR123 class, which is a research writing class. I chose this topic because it hit close to home for me. I remember hearing about the Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard cases and thinking how sad that things like this could happen here in this country where we are supposed to have the right to live our lives without fear of being hurt because of our lifestyles.

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