

# Theater group's discussion shines light on gay attitudes

## ■ Residents speak about experiences supporting GLBT rights

BY DAVID HOFFMAN  
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While thousands of supporters of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights swarmed Washington on Oct. 11 as part of the National Equality March, dozens gathered in Reston the next day for a more somber discussion of the past and future of the gay rights movement with local theater group the Reston Community Players.

The group was one of more than 150 others around the world that performed "The Laramie Project, 10 Years Later, An Epilogue," a documentary-style drama about the 1998 murder of 22-year-old gay college student Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyo. And after the performance, about 50 people — a mixture of actors and audience members — stayed behind in the Reston Community Center to discuss the murder itself and how it has affected or changed the gay movement during the past 10 years.

"It was a horrendous thing that happened," said local actor Joshua Redford. The murder left "a very deep wound in the community."

But while the incident was terrible, it also captivated news headlines across the country — and galvanized countless supporters around the nation to become more involved in the gay rights movement.

"To get this change, we've got to keep it rolling like this," said former RCP president Sue Pinkman, the actress portraying Judy Shepard, Matthew's mother. "This is exactly what's happening because you're in this room."

Change did not come easy, said Andrew Regiae, the play's

director. He acknowledged that when the Tectonic Theatre Company, the group of New York City-based actors and directors who went to Laramie in 1999 to create the original play, returned there last year, "unfortunately they were surprised" how very often prejudiced attitudes had not changed at all — a conclusion presented as a key element of the rewritten play in the epilogue written earlier this year.

Nevertheless, "the hope is to make a significant change" with this production, Regiae insisted.

And though some locals argued there is no possibility of reaching "the Glenn Becks" of the world, others — such as actor Gary Lawhorne, a Metro worker who lives in Leesburg — said it is the country's younger generation that is crucial to the movement.

"I have two daughters," Lawhorne told the audience, "and they're here tonight, and one of them is in her schools' Gay Straight Alliance. ... There are moments that come when we have to look within ourselves, and put things right."

After the discussion had ended, Reston residents Karen Hastings and her husband Steven Hazelton still wanted to be heard on the importance of treating all persons fairly, regardless of their sexual orientation. They pointed proudly at their son Nicholas, a senior at South Lakes High School and a leader in the school's Gay Straight Alliance.

"We have been told multiple times that we helped to educate the student body on a very important and current issue, something we are all very proud of," Nicholas said. "I do think



attitudes toward the GLBT in my community have only changed for the better every year, [and] South Lakes itself has done a great deal to help with starting and accepting the GSA as well as helping with the activities that we want to have.”

In fact, Judy Shepard herself visited the school Oct. 7 and held a school-wide assembly, an event that was “one of my proudest moments as a student at South Lakes,” Nicholas said. “I saw teenage girls — and boys — crying, something I’ve never witnessed at a school assembly.”

“One thing that Mrs. Shepard said really reverberated with me,” Nicholas said. “The GLBT community should be shown ‘acceptance,’ not mere ‘tolerance.’ ... Once the assembly was over, every single student almost immediately stood up for a standing ovation.”

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**Nicholas Hastings, South Lakes High School Gay Straight Alliance**