

EVERYBODY CARRIES A PIECE OF THE TRUTH



"I think right now our most important teachers must be Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney [the men convicted of murdering Matthew Shepard]. They have to be our teachers. How did they learn? What did we as a society do to teach them?"

—FATHER ROGER SCHMIT, CATHOLIC PRIEST IN LARAMIE, WYOMING,
QUOTED IN *THE LARAMIE PROJECT*

In This Guide

- Why teach *The Laramie Project*?
- Create Your Own Project To Combat Prejudice in Your Community
- Resources for Further Exploration

VIEWING STRATEGY

The Laramie Project's running time is 97 minutes. Teachers have permission to tape the broadcast for classroom viewing, in accordance with the guidelines below.

BEFORE VIEWING

Once you have established a clear set of ground rules, you might introduce *The Laramie Project* by distributing the inTIME magazine produced to accompany the film. Direct the class to page 2 and have them read about the killing of Matthew Shepard and reactions to it. Ask students to answer the poll questions posed on page 2: Could an attack like the one on Shepard occur in your town? Continue by exploring the process of creating the play (pages 4 and 5) and historical precedents for bias crimes (pages 6 and 7). Then turn to the Notebook section on page 8, and invite students to react to the quotations in the Verbatim column. Each of these statements can be used to spark a meaningful discussion. How, for example, do students react to Zackie Salmon's point that she would not feel comfortable showing affection in public for her same-sex partner?

As a class, define pertinent terms: What is homophobia? Xenophobia? Bigotry? Tolerance? Acceptance? Ask students to watch for examples of these behaviors when they view the film.

WHILE VIEWING

As students watch the program, encourage them to take notes in answer to the following questions: Which characters and statements moved you most? Why? What facial expressions, scenery or other images elicited the strongest reactions? At what points were you surprised? Angry? Sad? Keep a log of emotional responses as you watch the film.

(continued on page 2)

The 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old gay student at the University of Wyoming, focused national attention on hate crimes, bigotry and homophobia. One month after Shepard's killing, playwright Moisés Kaufman and members of his theater company decided to travel to Laramie to document the town's reactions to Shepard's death. After conducting more than 200 interviews, the writers assembled *The Laramie Project*, a unique play—and now a film—created from verbatim excerpts of conversations with the residents of Laramie.

At its core, *The Laramie Project* centers on a stark fact: Matthew Shepard was hated—and killed—because of who he was. In an era of increasing divisiveness, viewing this film can inspire students to reflect on a myriad of vital and timely issues. These include the nature of tolerance, acceptance and pluralism; the meaning of community; and the struggle to overcome hate, bigotry and violence.

APPROACHING THE MATERIAL

The Laramie Project contains frank language and references to sexual themes. While the film may elicit strong reactions from students, it is possible to moderate a class discussion on this topic while maintaining an academic focus. The following guidelines, developed by the editors of *Teaching Tolerance*, can help ensure that discussion remains constructive:

- Class members should agree on a set of ground rules that will steer the discussion. Ask for student input on what those principles should be.

Examples of guidelines include a commitment to confidentiality and to respect others, a ban on the use of slurs, and an agreement that only one person will speak at a time.

- When discussing sexual-orientation issues, it is imperative that teachers and students resist the urge to place gay and lesbian youth, those who are perceived to be gay, or those with gay friends or family members in the spotlight. Students will enter into the conversation as they feel comfortable.

- It is the moderator's role to establish as comfortable a setting as possible. Special care must be taken to ensure that those holding a minority view are not vilified by students "on the other side." The moderator should also pose questions to the class to help keep the conversation on track.

- The point of a classroom discussion of diversity issues—including sexual orientation—is not to reach a class consensus, as tempting as that may be. Rather, the goal is to establish a forum for a free and respectful exchange of ideas.



THE LARAMIE PROJECT ON HBO

Premieres Saturday,
March 16, 2002, at 8 PM / 7 c

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AFTER VIEWING

The Laramie Project film can spark class discussion and critical thinking on a broad array of topics. Areas to explore include:

Portrait of Laramie

Ask students: What impressions of Laramie, Wyoming, do you take away from the film? What statements and images caused you to form these impressions? How did Laramie residents respond to Matthew Shepard's killing? In what ways is Laramie a "mirror of the nation"? How is Laramie similar to and different from your town? What changes occurred in the town over the course of the film?

Lynchings Past and Present

TIME's writer describes the killing of Matthew Shepard as a lynching. What does this mean? How does Shepard's killing compare to the crimes described on pages 6 and 7 of the inTIME magazine?

Unlikely Teachers

Father Roger Schmit calls Shepard's killers "our most important teachers." What is your reaction to this statement? What can McKinney and Henderson teach America? If you had a chance to interview McKinney or Henderson, what questions would you ask them?

Presence and Absence

Moisés Kaufman made a conscious decision not to include Matthew Shepard as a character in *The Laramie Project*. Why do you think he made this choice? What impact does Shepard's absence have on viewers? How do you think the film would change if Shepard were featured as a character?

The Power of Voices

In watching the film, how does the process through which it was made influence your experience of it? What is the value of hearing the actual words of Laramie residents? What is the impact of having actors portray these people?

Revenge and Forgiveness

After a jury found Aaron McKinney guilty of murder, what statement did Dennis Shepard, Matthew's father, make regarding the death penalty? Imagine that you had been in Dennis Shepard's position. Would you have made the same choice he did?

Standing Up To Hatred

How did people in Laramie stand up to hatred, intolerance and violence? Which Laramie residents struck you as most tolerant? Most accepting? What distinction do you see between tolerance and acceptance? How do you think we should measure the effectiveness of campaigns against bigotry?

Getting Involved

Ask students: What concrete steps can you take—in your school, in your town, in your state and on a national level—to help prevent anti-gay violence and other forms of prejudice and bigotry? (For a worksheet designed to encourage students to take action in their own communities, see page 3 of this guide.)

WHY TEACH THE LARAMIE PROJECT?

inTIME asked ReLeah Lent, a veteran educator and member of TIME Classroom's National Advisory Board, how and why she would use *The Laramie Project* film and print materials in her classroom. An English teacher at Bay High School in Panama City, Florida, and a staff member of the Florida Literacy Reading and Excellence Project, Lent is co-author of *At the Schoolhouse Gate: Lessons in Intellectual Freedom* (Heinemann, 2002).

One of our greatest challenges as high school teachers is to create thoughtful, independent learners who internalize classroom lessons so that they become relevant to the learners' own world. *The Laramie Project* may well become one of those experiences that will remain with students for a lifetime. In an era when students have seen it all—either in reality or vicariously—this material will, I believe, touch them in places that they haven't yet been touched. The film and accompanying print materials have the potential to inspire students to ponder, explore, listen, empathize, stretch and respond.

This type of powerful teaching tool, inherently relevant, may well elicit passionate responses. Students may even come to view their most basic values—values that have been a part of their families and communities for generations—in a new light.

When the Columbine tragedy unfolded, students nationwide were forced to deal with a previously inconceivable reality. Our



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responsibility as teachers widened from our subject curriculum to encompass the needs of young people compelled to discuss, question and shape their own understanding of how teens could kill their

peers. Once again, with the *Laramie* materials, we are asked to go beyond our roles as traditional teachers into a place that is not always comfortable.

Topics such as homosexuality, religious doctrine and civil rights have no "fill-in-the blank" answers. Abstract concepts such as revenge, forgiveness, hate, tolerance and truth are even more difficult to squeeze into a curriculum box. But to grapple with these issues

in a safe, academic setting is necessary as we examine what makes us all human. Yes, students may express strong opinions, their emotions may run high, and they may even find the discussion and materials disturbing—but this is a small price to pay for leading us all in the direction of a more tolerant future.

CREATE YOUR OWN LARAMIE PROJECT

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ate, prejudice and division can only be conquered by citizen-activists willing to stand up and speak out. In every community—and at every school—there are countless ways to get involved, to spark dialogue and to build bridges.

Working in small groups or as a class, follow

the steps below to create a *Laramie Project* of your own. Note that the suggested projects at right are only starting points. The best ideas are those that work for you and your community.

PLANNING YOUR PROJECT

1. In small groups or as a class, identify issues or problems at your school or in your community that you would like to see changed, addressed or improved. These might relate to ending an unfair situation; to reducing prejudice; to promoting understanding of difference; or to preventing hate crimes. List the issues here:

2. From the above list, select the one issue that you consider most pressing and circle it. Then brainstorm a variety of projects you could undertake to address this issue. To get started, review the suggestions at right. What steps could you take to tackle your issue? Name three.

- a.) _____
- b.) _____
- c.) _____

3. With classmates, discuss the pros and cons of each option outlined above and select one activity that you will undertake. Form a group of students who want to address the same issue. Group members include:

4. Within your group, list steps for the activity and decide who will work on each step.

5. Conduct the activity. Then relate your experiences to the class. Discuss: How did the community benefit from your project? How do you feel about the work you did or the service you performed? What did you learn from this experience?

6. Share your results with students around the country. Let us know what your class did, and we'll feature selected projects on timeclassroom.com. Send project summaries to Bennett Singer, inTIME, 1271 6th Avenue—Room 2550B, New York, NY 10020.

STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO PROMOTE UNDERSTANDING AND IMPROVE YOUR COMMUNITY

GET INVOLVED in a building or cleanup project to benefit your community. Paint over graffiti, clean up trash or design a mural. If a project isn't already under way, launch your own. Identify issues that reach across divisions, and forge alliances for tackling them.

START a monthly "diversity roundtable" to discuss critical issues facing your community.

ESTABLISH a box in a public place where people can deposit questions they have about race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender or religion. Find answers and post them on a bulletin board near the box.

SPONSOR a community dinner, where people bring a dish typical of their ethnic background.

ORGANIZE a community-wide yard sale and use the proceeds to improve a park or community center.

VOLUNTEER at a local social-service organization or at an organization whose mission is to counter hate and promote diversity.

LOBBY your state representative, Congressperson and/or Senator to support any hate-crime prevention bills that they can vote on. Mount a petition drive to build support for and awareness of pending legislation.

INTERVIEW residents of your community about an issue that has caused controversy or debate. Transcribe the interviews and create a script modeled on *The Laramie Project*. Hold a staged reading for classmates and community members.

SOURCES: TOLERANCE.ORG, HEALING THE HATE



FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

BOOKS

Allen, James, editor. *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000). An illustrated account of the atrocities of lynching.

Gibson, Scott, editor. *Blood & Tears: Poems for Matthew Shepard* (New York: Painted Leaf Press, 1999). Seventy-five poets honor the memory of Matthew Shepard.

Kaufman, Moisés. *The Laramie Project* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001). The script of the acclaimed play.

VIDEO-AND-TEXT KITS

A Place at the Table: Struggles for Equality in America (Montgomery, Alabama: Teaching Tolerance, 2000). Stories of unsung heroes who have fought against discrimination and intolerance throughout U.S. history. Includes a 40-minute video, 144-page text and lesson plans. One free copy available per school; to order, fax written request on letterhead from department chair to (334) 264-7310.

The Shadow of Hate: A History of Intolerance in America (Montgomery, Alabama: Teaching Tolerance, 1995). Stories of Americans who were hated. Includes 40-minute video, 128-page text and teacher's guide. See preceding entry for ordering procedure.

FILMS AND VIDEOS

Ethnic Notions by Marlon Riggs (1987, 56 min.). This Emmy-winning documentary takes viewers on a disturbing voyage through American history, tracing the deep-rooted stereotypes that have fueled anti-black prejudice. Distributor: California Newsreel; www.newsreel.org.

Licensed to Kill by Arthur Dong (1997, 77 min.). Profiles men whose hate for homosexuals led them to commit murder. Distributor: DeepFocus Productions, (323) 662-6575.

The Fight in the Fields: César Chávez and the Farmworkers' Struggle by Rick Tejada-Flores and Ray Telles (1997, 120 min.). The story of Chávez, about migrant workers' struggle for equality in America. Distributor: Cinema Guild, www.cinemaguild.com.

Rabbit in the Moon by Emiko Omori (1999, 56 min.). A personal examination of the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II by a filmmaker who was sent to the camps as a small child. Distributor: Transit Media, 1 (800) 343-5540.

The Times of Harvey Milk by Rob Epstein and Richard Schmiechen (1984, 87 min.). An Academy Award-winning portrait of Harvey Milk, the first openly gay elected official in America, who was assassinated in 1978. Distributor: Telling Pictures, www.tellingpictures.com.

WEBSITES

www.matthewshepard.org

A memorial to Matthew Shepard, with links to anti-bias groups and suggestions for further reading.

www.glsen.org

Materials for teachers and students from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.

www.tolerance.org

Readings and activities to combat hate and promote tolerance.

www.partnersagainsthate.org

Extensive information on hate crimes.

www.adl.org

Tools to fight bigotry from the Anti-Defamation League.

www.hbo.com/hate

An exploration of Internet hate, with personal stories and ideas for promoting tolerance.

www.timeclassroom.com/laramie

Resources to fight bias and foster citizenship.

STARTING POINTS FOR WRITING, RESEARCH AND REFLECTION

1. The power of images. Select an ethnic, racial or sexual minority and investigate how that group has been portrayed in movies and other forms of popular culture. You might choose historical examples, such as how Native Americans are depicted in Westerns or in *The Lone Ranger*; or you could focus on more recent examples, such as the way that gay men and lesbians are portrayed on American television. How do the media and popular culture shape our notions of identity and reinforce or challenge stereotypes?

2. Responses to hate crimes. Investigate the 1998 murder of James Byrd in Jasper, Texas, the 1993 killing of Brandon Teena in Nebraska, or a hate crime that occurred in your own state. What do these crimes have in common with the murder of Matthew Shepard? How did each community respond?



TEXAS HATE CRIME: Blood stains and dried flowers marked the spot where the body of James Byrd was found after being dragged to death on a Texas road.

3. Global connections.

Hatred has been an enduring characteristic of human history, particularly in the 20th century. Investigate one of the genocides that occurred in the last 100 years, linking these global events to themes in *The Laramie Project*. Possible topics: the Armenian genocide; the Holocaust; the bloodshed after Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947-48; ethnic cleansing in the Balkan wars; tribal and ethnic strife in Afghanistan today.



VISIT WWW.HBO.COM/FILMS

to learn more about
The Laramie Project.

For additional teaching resources, visit
www.timeclassroom.com/laramie

inTIME

HBO FILMS