TAKING THE BLAME: WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR SHEPARD’S DEATH?

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Blaming the residents of Wyoming, state legislators or even Gov. Jim Geringer for the murder of Matthew Shepard, a self-proclaimed homosexual, is ludicrous. But that’s what is happening.

Shepard, a University of Wyoming student, was robbed, tortured and beaten into a coma and tied to a fence post east of Laramie last week. Shepard was pistol-whipped with a .357 magnum so severely that he had a two-inch depression behind his right ear. He was pounded into a coma and remained tied to the fence for 18 hours before being found by a dirt bike rider. Shepard died from his injuries five days later in a Colorado hospital.

Shepard's death has renewed a growing chorus calling for hate crime legislation in Wyoming and broader national legislation.

Jim Spencer of Austin, Texas, in a Letter to the Editor of the Wyoming Tribune-Eagle (Oct. 15 edition) said that "the people of Wyoming should share responsibility for the atmosphere of hate toward homosexuals in this country that led to the death of Matthew Shepard."

He is not alone in his feelings. Laramie's Walt Boulden, a friend of Shepard, said "I personally hold every Wyoming legislator who has opposed or voted against hate crime legislation over the last years personally responsible for the death of Matt."

Wyoming or Laramie residents are no more responsible for Shepard's death than Colorado residents are responsible for the death of UW Professor Steven Heyman who was killed Nov. 1, 1993, by a car in Denver, or all Wyoming residents for the July kidnapping and murder of eight-year-old Christin Lamb in Powell while visiting her grandparents.

The responsibility of Shepard's death can be placed squarely on the shoulders of Aaron James McKinney and Russell Henderson. The duo have been charged with first-degree murder in the death of Shepard. Despite all that is known through news reports of Shepard's death, we all must remember that McKinney and Henderson are presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

Even if Wyoming had enacted a hate law earlier this year, it is doubtful it would have prevented Shepard's death. Criminals rarely look at the law books to determine the penalty of a crime before committing it.

To blame Wyoming for Shepard's death is neither accurate nor logical.

If non-Wyoming residents want to place the blame on anyone, they should be looking at Henderson and McKinney, and not the law-abiding people of Wyoming.

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