

The Man Behind an Event in Heart-Rending ‘Matt Shepard is a Friend of Mine’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on February 14, 2015 - 5:45pm

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – In 1998, the murder of Matthew Shepard led to an overview of the hate crimes in America, especially the type of assault crimes perpetuated against the gay community. In essence, Shepard became a martyr and a symbol for something much larger. An old high school classmate remembers his legacy for this, and for just being a soul buddy, in “Matt Shepard is a Friend of Mine.”

The timing of the film’s release comes as the State of Alabama is determined to deny the rights of marriage to gay people despite an opposing court order. This also comes on the heels of the racially combustible incidents in Ferguson, Cleveland and New York City. It is a reminder that there are human beings behind the unjustly murdered, with full lives and family/friends who desperately miss them. While the world knows Matthew Shepard as a victim of a hate crime, to his mother, father and former high school friends – like the filmmaker, Michele Josue – he is Matt, and he has created a void in their lives that cannot be filled with symbolic martyrdom.

The purpose of the film was to get behind Matthew Shepard, the sorrowful victim of a homophobic murder, to the Matt Shepard who was a dutiful son and friend – despite a eventful past – and the life of the party in his unconventional high school years. As the stigma for being gay loosened its grip by the end of the 20th Century, Matt Shepard had to endure his own journey of loss and renewal.



Matt Shepard and Film Creator Michele Josue as High Schoolers in ‘Matt Shepard Is a Friend of Mine’

Photo credit: *Run Rabbit Run Media*

Following Shepard's family from the upper middle class environs of Casper, Wyoming, to their expatriate status of when his father began working in Saudi Arabia, Matt comes alive through the reminiscences of the filmmaker Josue, his parents and the fellow travelers that traveled his path – which led to his murder by Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson in Laramie, Wyoming, on October 12th, 1998.

What is most apparent in this story was the need for the filmmaker to embrace Shepard's story, 16 years after the murder. It is telling that even though she was now in her mid-thirties, the story and the man never left her, and her contribution to bringing Matt alive is equivalent to humanizing Emmet Till, the polarizing murder victim that broke open the civil rights movement. The "Matthew Shepard" of the federal 2009 Hate Crime Act that bears his name is connected to Matt Shepard, but in many ways he isn't, and that is what Josue is rectifying.

His short life was quite remarkable, as his parents moved him and his brother from white bread Casper, Wyoming, to Saudi Arabia. The boarding school that became his high school is where he met his second family, which included the filmmaker, and their memories are vital in capturing who Matt really was. The ghost of his murder haunts them all, and their memories are that much sharper due to its shocking nature, and delivers Matt back to humanity.

His parents are the stars of the documentary, as their expression and evolution through Matt's travails become part of the expansiveness of how Shepard became a symbol for assault crimes against gays and other minorities. From the time he came out as gay to his parents (his mother knew, his father perfectly accepting) to their trials associated with the murder, they were amazingly resilient and cognizant of what Matt's memory could do for others. They are both extraordinary parents and beacons for change.



An Iconic Picture of Matt Shepard at the Time of His Murder in 'Matt Shepard Is a Friend of Mine'

Photo credit: Run Rabbit Run Media

The story that writer/director Michele Josue is as personal as a documentary can be, as it is designed to seek closure for the part of her that had been ripped out by Matt's murder. There is an extraordinary sequence in which the camera pulls back as she seeks counsel from a Catholic priest, and her reaction has him consoling her, and creating a new forgiveness for her, which happens right on the spot within the interview.

The ripple effect that Matt Shepard's murder imparted to the darkness of hatred has formed into a tsunami of reform for LGBT citizens, all the way up to this weekend in Alabama. It becomes easy to forget the source of all that change was a somewhat inwardly drawn 21 year old gay man, split apart from his potential life only 16 years ago, in another time in America.

"Matt Shepard is a Friend of Mine" continues its limited release on February 13th in Chicago, at the AMC River East 21 Theatre, 322 East Illinois Street. Written and directed by Michele Josue. Not Rated.



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