



GLAAD: ABC's Hindsight on Matthew Shepard's Murder Far Less than 20/20

Executive Director Joan M. Garry: 'This simply is not a credible piece of journalism'

New York - In response to a piece airing tonight on ABC, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) and the family of Matthew Shepard today called on the media and the viewing public to scrutinize the sensationalistic claims and distortions offered by 20/20 in its attempt to rewrite the history of Shepard's murder case.

GLAAD and the Matthew Shepard Foundation have published a GLAAD Viewer's Guide to the program, featuring a detailed look at the journalistic problems with the piece, at <http://www.glaad.org> and at <http://www.matthewshepard.org>.

"This piece says much, much more about 20/20 than it does about the murder of Matthew Shepard," said GLAAD Executive Director Joan M. Garry. 20/20's misleading oversimplifications and distortions do a tremendous disservice to a complicated case. This simply is not a credible piece of journalism."

People with first-hand accounts of what happened in Laramie -- including Judy Shepard, Dave O'Malley (the Laramie police captain whose comments to 20/20 are only selectively represented), Moisés Kaufman (author of The Laramie Project, who interviewed more than 200 residents of Laramie in 1998 and 1999), and Romaine Patterson (who was close friends with Shepard during the last two years of his life) -- dispute the accuracy of 20/20's piece.

"Dennis and I were dismayed and saddened by the tabloid nature of the show and its lack of serious reporting of facts in evidence," said Judy Shepard. "Though I was not permitted by 20/20 to view the segment, the copy made available to the press left all of my relevant comments regarding the direction of the show and the facts in this case on the cutting room floor. My remarks were reduced to a few very personal maternal comments taken out of context to make it appear as if I agreed with 20/20's theories. Nothing could be farther from the truth."

GLAAD also is raising concerns about the initial media coverage and reviews of the program.

"Unfortunately, some TV writers are falling for this: hook, line and sinker," Garry says. "20/20 is relying on the fact that some reporters will accept its claims at face value and won't go back to the historical record to research the facts for themselves."

Among the serious flaws in 20/20's report:

20/20 does not put forward a single piece of incontrovertible evidence to back its assertion that drugs were the central cause of Matthew Shepard's murder. Its case is based on conjecture, sensational repetition of unsubstantiated claims, and sources whose credibility is highly dubious at best.

The show relies on interviews with sources seriously lacking in credibility, including but not limited to: Doc O'Connor, Kristen Price, Elaine Baker and Aaron McKinney -- all of whom offer stories that are contradicted by others and/or by the public record. In Price's case, her newly invented story suggests she may have committed perjury as well. It is doubtful that any credible news organization would use such sources as the foundation of a story.

20/20 ignores critical facts to advance its claim that anti-gay bias played no role in Shepard's murder. The show fails to examine McKinney's confession to sheriffs' investigators, which was one of the key sources of information about the anti-gay bias element in the case. 20/20 also fails to acknowledge that the drug angle it presents as news received wide coverage in 1999 as part of McKinney's defense strategy and as part of a "Harper's" magazine story that explored many of the exact same themes.

On Nov. 9, GLAAD received a press release from 20/20 promoting the sweeps-month show. GLAAD's Garry then reached out to 20/20 Executive Producer David Sloan, raised serious concerns about the sensationalistic tone of the release, and requested a preview copy of the show -- a request Sloan declined. GLAAD subsequently secured a press screening copy from a source outside ABC.

"This was indeed a complex murder; no one is suggesting otherwise," Garry concluded. "But for 20/20 to lay out a case based on speculation, innuendo, the avoidance of critical facts, sources lacking in basic credibility, and reliance on conflicting pieces of information is reckless journalism."