



Slain Calif. Teen Possible Hate-Crime Victim

*News Update Fri., Feb. 15, 2008
by Amy Wooten*

The young, gay victim of a California school shooting has died after allegedly being shot by a 14-year-old classmate because of his sexual orientation and gender expression.

A classmate shot junior high school student Lawrence King, 15, in the head Feb. 12. King was pronounced brain-dead the following afternoon. Files have been charged to investigate the matter as a hate crime. The attacker will be charged with murder.

The eighth-grade, openly gay student was shot by a classmate at E.O. Green School in Oxnard, Calif. Ventura County Star reported that King suffered a massive stroke Feb. 13, causing his brain to die.

The Los Angeles Times reported that friends of King say he identified as gay, and occasionally wore make-up and feminine clothing. He was also harassed at his school, according to Equality California.

Authorities are investigating the shooting as a possible hate crime.

LGBT students are often victims of bullying and harassment in the classroom. LGBT students are more likely to be threatened with a weapon and feel unsafe at school, according to the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network's (GLSEN's) Web site. LGBT California students are five times more likely to report being threatened or injured with a weapon, according to a survey conducted by the California Department of Education.

Many LGBT organizations have released statements highlighting that anti-gay harassment and violence in the classrooms and hallways need to stop.

"With young people coming out at younger ages, our school—especially our junior highs and middle school—need to be proactive about teaching respect for diversity based on sexual orientation and gender identity," said Gay-Straight Alliance Network Executive Director Carolyn Laub in a statement released by the organization. "The tragic death of Lawrence King is a wake-up call for our schools to better protect students from harassment at school. As a society, we can prevent this kind of violence from happening."

California has laws that aim to protect LGBT students. On Jan. 1, a California law (The California Student Civil Rights Act) went into effect; this statute protects students from harassment and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation. Another law, The California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act, went into effect in 2000.

In a statement, Masen Davis, executive director of the Transgender Law Center, said the organization is proud that California has such laws, but "the sad reality is that even with these protections, violence against gay and gender non-conforming students happens all too often. We must address the culture of bullying in our schools to ensure that all youth have safe places to learn."

The executive director of GLSEN, Kevin Jennings, called the incident “senseless” in a recent statement. “As a nation, we’ve had our heads in the sand for far too long,” he said. “We need to do everything we can to prevent something like this from happening again.”

Award-winning documentary filmmaker Debra Chasnoff, whose work includes the film *That's Elementary: Talking About Gay Issues in School*, called the tragedy a “horrific reminder” that violence and bullying of LGBT students continues. “We wish we could say we’ve come a long way since 1998 when Matthew Shepard was murdered when he was in college just because he was gay. But now, similarly-motivated hate crimes are occurring in middle schools.”

“This terrible incident underscores the fact that we cannot let hate go unchecked in our schools and communities,” Judy Shepard, executive director of the Matthew Shepard Foundation and mother of hate-crime victim Matthew Shepard, said in a statement released by GLSEN. “Our young people need our direction and guidance to prevent this type of crime from happening. I urge all parents and teachers to educate their children and students about acceptance, understanding and compassion.”

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force also recently released a statement. “Right now we don’t know exactly how anti-gay hate expressed itself in the murder of Lawrence King, said executive director Matt Foreman. “We do know is that he was harassed on a daily basis because of his sexual orientation and gender expression. We do know that adults at his junior high school did not stop it and that kind of tolerance of anti-gay bigotry is pervasive in our nation’s schools. Our hearts go out to Lawrence’s family — and to all young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender kids who are— right now, right this minute— being bullied and beaten in school while adults look the other way.”