

THE TENNESSEAN

NOVEMBER 8, 1999

Victim's mom reaches out to gay teens

By SHEILA BURKE
Staff Writer

The mother of Matthew Shepard, a gay man who was brutally beaten and murdered in Wyoming, has sent a letter to the Nashville chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays to be included in a mailing sent out to area high school counselors.

"I believe that my son was killed because somehow, somewhere, his killers learned that the lives of gay people are not as worthy of respect, dignity and honor as the lives of other people," Judy Shepard wrote in the letter.

Matthew Shepard was tied

to a fence, bludgeoned with a pistol and left to die last year.

Judy Shepard asks counselors and school administrators to make sure that no student suffers as her son did.

PFLAG officials say gay and lesbian students are often victimized daily in the form of harassment and verbal abuse by other students.

Travis Danker, who graduated from Mt. Juliet High School last year and is a member of One in Teen, a support group for gays ages 14 to 22, said high school can be a difficult time for gays. He said he was targeted by some students after he told others that he was gay.

"I would come into the school and they would say, 'Hey, look at the queer, look at the faggot walking down the stairs.'"

On one occasion, students surrounded Danker in the parking lot behind the school and tried to beat him up.

"It's a lot to deal with when you're in high school," Danker said.

The mailing, which is being sent to high schools in Davidson and surrounding counties, is part of an ongoing effort by PFLAG to get counselors and teachers to reach out to students who may be suffering in a hostile climate or coping with discrimina-

tion.

It also encourages counselors to direct parents to PFLAG.

"Parents find it easier to talk with other parents of lesbians and gays," said PFLAG co-chairman Wayne Rosing.

Teachers and administrators are often within earshot of verbal attacks on gay students yet fail to do anything about it, PFLAG officials said.

The packet also includes a pamphlet from the American Psychological Association, which states that sexual orientation is not a choice, nor is it considered to be a mental illness.

In the letter, Judy Shepard

says that 45% of gay males and 28% of lesbians are

either verbally or physically assaulted in school; 28% wind up dropping out because of harassment; and gay students are two to three times more likely to commit suicide.

"While it is too late to help my son," Judy Shepard wrote, "it is important to recognize that other children, right in your school, are facing devastating physical and emotional violence that is crushing their potential, their dreams and sometimes their very will to live." ■



SHEPARD