



By Erica Goff

**FAIRBANKS** — When 22-year-old Matthew Shepard was brutally beaten and left to die on the night of Oct. 6, 1998, there was no doubt in the small town of Laramie, Wyo., that his difference was the driving force behind the violence.

When Shepard died just six days later, the town together faced the challenge of mourning not only his death but the deep division that existed among its residents, now thrust into a national spotlight because of a hate crime against a young gay man. What those residents did not know is how their story — the tale of a town collectively facing prejudice and violence and the reactions of individuals coping with the reality of what had happened — would be told over and over, reaching as far away as Fairbanks, Alaska.

“This play really looks at the challenges facing our nation in terms of tolerance, whether that be gay or black or whatever. It is a dark subject but it can be very uplifting,” said Carrie Baker, who is directing the local performance of “The Laramie Project,” of the play written about that town’s reaction to Shepard’s death. “It shines a light on the fact that hope can come from tragedy.”

“The Laramie Project” is a play that grew from a project developed by a New York-based theater company, Tectonic Theater Project, that wanted to respond to the tragedy in a meaningful way. The group traveled to the small Wyoming town six times over the course of about two years, conducting over 200 interviews with residents. Some of those interviewed were directly involved in the case, such

and others were residents who knew the stories and simply had an opinion or reaction one way or the other. Some of the interviews were conducted around the time that Shepard’s assailants, Russell Arthur Henderson and Aaron James McKinney, were tried and convicted. With hours of recorded material, they set to work on an emotionally charged but unbiased play.

Baker, who has wanted to direct the play for some time now, said the play offers objectivity.

“Part of what is really exciting about this play is that it offers a very balanced look at what happened,” she said. “For every amount of hate and homophobia that is expressed, there is an equal amount of emotion and sympathy. It is really diverse and varied, and to me it does not suggest a political agenda.”

University of Alaska Fairbanks theater majors performing in the show agree, despite their individual sympathies toward

the events. Senior Anna Gagne-Hawes said the story looks at “the whole spectrum of beliefs,” and gives both sides of