Gay Rights: Time for a Return to the ACT UP Approach

When the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP) organized itself in 1987 to inspire the queer community and others to get involved in HIV/AIDS activism, a simple but powerful adage carried their message far and wide: “Silence = Death.” This little phrase became the AIDS mantra of the Reagan/Bush Era and gave ACT UP its fame as the most significant grassroots lobby of that generation. “Silence = Death” was so prolific as a political quip of protest that even still, as I walk about the streets of New York today, I will occa-
sionally come across
some artifact from those days when it was at
the tip of everyone’s tongue. I’ve seen rem-
nants of graffiti with which it was etched and
sidewalks in which it was carved before the
cement set. Yet, the “Silence = Death” con-
sciousness is, these days, noticeably missing
from queer political discussions and organiz-
ing.

It’s time to bring it back.

After the highly-publicized murders of
Billy Jack Gaither and Matthew Shepard —
as well as many other less publicized but
equally gruesome beatings, tortures, and
slayings — it seems appropriate to reflect on
the ways in which silence and death are rela-
ted. These murders and beatings should
make us recognize that queer people still suf-
f er under the tyranny of silence, especially in
places like Laramie, Wyoming and Sylacauga,
Alabama.

Judy Shepard, Matthew’s mom, speaks of
her son as having been someone who wanted
to change the way the world reacts to differ-
ence. When asked recently if she was sur-
prised to find herself in the role of an activist,
she said that one of her reasons for starting a
foundation (that will teach the values of diver-
sity and understanding in memory of
Matthew) is to spread the message that her
son himself tried to share with everyone in
his life. Now that his life has been taken from
him, Mrs. Shepard is filling his shoes. She
says, “He would love to be out there sharing
ideas and talking and debating the issues. I
owe it to him.”

Even though murder does silence those
who are killed, as a result of the violence, the
rest of us may find ourselves talking more
about things previously unspoken. The moth-
er of Billy Jack Gaither told reporters that her
son never spoke to her about his being gay.
“If he was gay,” Marion Gaither said, “he kept
it from me.” But, Billy Jack’s death has pro-
voked the reconsideration in Congress of
Federal Hate Crimes legislation that aims to
classify gays and lesbians as a protected group of citizens, to be listed alongside people of color, women, and other minority groups that are already protected under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Justice Department.

We should learn from both of these murders that we cannot allow death to silence us. If we do, the murderers will have actually succeeded. They will have accomplished their goal of scaring us and overwhelming us with their ignoble displays of power.

How tragic it is, then, that only 500 people participated in a public political funeral for Billy Jack here in New York City on Monday, whereas a similar event after Matthew's death drew nearly ten times that many. Rather than having thoughts of protest etched in our memories or carved in our history, we should be crying out with increasing clamor today. The more deaths there are, the more imperative it becomes for the rest of us to speak out. If our visible numbers decrease with each attack,
then the insufferable isolation that led to Matthew and Billy Jack's murders will put more and more of the world at risk. Nobody will ever feel safe without visible masses of queer people rising up in a unified voice.

Twelve years ago when ACT UP founder and famed author Larry Kramer began to recruit members, he said, "All power is the willingness to take responsibility." In this era, what he said bears repeating. And in connection with recent events, it behooves us to change the balance of power. We must shift power away from the murderers and hate-mongers by taking responsibility for our community and our rights when not one, not two, but hundreds of our own around the world are killed every year.

It is 1999, and in this week's issue of The Advocate, Kramer now says of queer people and politics: "I'm worried about too many gay people believing that things are not so bad these days." Things are bad, according to Kramer, because queer people and their allies are too silent. Silence will be the death of our political movement, our loved ones, and ourselves if we don't continue to take increasing responsibility. Now is the time to speak out. Now is the time to remember that silence very truly does equal death!

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Assumptions

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Recent events prove that silence equals death. Anti-gay murders deserve a vocal response.