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Parents praise hate crimes bill

White House demonstration highlights anti-gay violence

By **AMY CAVANAUGH**, Washington Blade | Oct 28 2009, 12:59 PM

About two dozen activists and parents of LGBT people gathered from 12-2 p.m. Wednesday in front of the White House for a demonstration organized by the Equality Forum to mark today's signing of the Matthew Shepard Amendment.

They carried large signs with photos of LGBT hate crime victims, including Harvey Milk.

Susan Wheeler, whose son Jim Wheeler committed suicide after sustained harassment in high school, called the hate crimes bill "a wonderful, hallmark piece of legislation." Wheeler came to D.C. from Lebanon, Pa. for the signing.

"Jim was teased and harassed in high school," she said. "It wasn't a specific hate crime, but that type of behavior leads to hate crimes. I'm happy for Judy, since this is something she fought for for so long."

Renee Singer came from Harrisburg, Pa. She has a gay son, and said she's been fighting for LGBT rights for a long time.

"This is a civil rights issue, and it isn't just about gay people," she said. "We're here to say thank you and remember those who lost their lives."

Hopefully something like this won't happen again, but the more rights that are passed, the better things will be for younger generations. We have to give them a reason for hope."

Malcolm Lazin, executive director of the Equality Forum, a national and international LGBT civil rights organization with an educational focus, said that the demonstration is about "celebrating the act and applauding Judy Shepard for her commitment to the cause and the support of President Obama and members of Congress."

"We want to make people recognize that the number of gay victims of hate crimes is over 16,000 since the murder of Matthew Shepard," he said. "This is a defining moment in America to recognize homophobia. Black civil rights legislation was passed in the 1960s, and while it protects African Americans, it didn't change America. We see this as a defining moment to change our culture."

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