

# CLASSROOM MINI UNIT



Matt Shepard  
is a friend of mine

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## ABOUT THIS LESSON

This lesson will use the film *Matt Shepard is a Friend of Mine* to help participants understand the far-reaching impact that bullying, homophobia, and other forms of bias have on the victims of hate crimes and their families and friends, as well as on witnesses, bystanders, and society in general. This lesson will encourage participants to be upstanders by facilitating empathetic connections, and then, by providing ways to apply this understanding, to inspire their own active involvement in the issues. The lesson is geared towards participants aged 13-17 but can be modified for other age groups.

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

This lesson fits in perfectly with units that address curriculum standards in language arts, social studies, American history, civics, thinking and reasoning, film studies, media literacy, conflict mediation and resolution, expository and creative writing, and service learning.

## TECHNIQUES AND SKILLS

Vocabulary building, large group discussion, small group work, critical and analytical thinking, supporting ideas with examples, comparing and contrasting information sources, listening skills, expository, creative, and responsive writing.

## LESSON PREPARATION

- Prepare a DVD player, television set or monitor, and a DVD of the film *Matt Shepard is a Friend of Mine*.
- Prepare copies of *Student Handouts* for distribution.

## KEY WORDS AND PHRASES

Lens, depiction, perception, personae, hate crime, homophobia, bias, prejudice, dynamics, ignorance, resentment, dehumanization, eulogy, legacy, advocate, assumption, empathy, compassion.

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## RATIONALE

The purpose of this lesson is to explore why bias exists and how it escalates into hate crimes and other aggressive hate-motivated behavior – examining the evolution from “difference” to “fear” to “anger” to “violence.” The purpose is also to explore how empathy, knowledge, and compassion can interrupt this cycle – how knowing people as people, not as symbols – can work towards the elimination of prejudice. Then, students will be encouraged to connect this exploration with social activism in their own lives.

## STUDENT OBJECTIVES

- *Students will explore the difference between how we view ourselves and how others view us.*
- *Students will use the film to explore issues of homophobia and other biases.*
- *Students will analyze information from written and visual sources.*
- *Students will analyze literary quotations.*
- *Students will explore how ignorance, when left unchecked, can escalate into violence.*
- *Students will apply this knowledge to their understanding of social activism and current events.*

## REQUIREMENTS

### MATERIALS

- *Whiteboard, chalkboard and chalk, or chart paper and markers.*
- *DVD player and television or monitor, and a DVD of the film *Matt Shepard is a Friend of Mine*.*
- *Student Handouts: *I Am, Me Through Different Lenses, Evolution of a Hate Crime*.*
- *Approximately four 45-minute class periods.*

Note: While it is not required, it is recommended that students view the film *Matt Shepard is a Friend of Mine* from start to finish before participating in this lesson. Viewing the film in its entirety will provide background, context, and insight into Matt’s life experience that will deepen students’ understandings of the concepts presented in this lesson, and strengthen their connections for building empathy and compassion for him, for his family and friends, and for the LGBTQ community at large. Doing so will add 2 more class periods to the implementation.

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## PROCEDURES

### DAY I

1. Distribute a copy of Student Handout: I Am to each student in the class. Allow 15 minutes for students to complete their handouts independently. Encourage students to write freely about the things that truly matter to them.
2. When 10 minutes have elapsed, reconvene. Allow time for some volunteers to share one or more of their responses with the class. Conduct a short, whole-group discussion about the writing activity using some or all of the following questions as a guide. Alternatively, write these questions on the white board, chalkboard, or on chart paper, and divide the students into pairs so they can discuss their writing and answer these questions with a partner.
  - *What was harder to complete, the sentence that starts "I am" or the one that starts "I am not" ? Why?*
  - *How many of you think that other people in this class completed one or more of the sentences on their sheet the same way you did? How many of you think you are the only one that completed your sentences the way you did? Why do you feel this way?*
  - *Do you think your friends or family would be surprised by what you wrote? Why or why not?*
  - *Do you think they would be able to guess your answers? Why or why not?*
  - *What was the easiest sentence for you to complete? Why?*
  - *What do you think your answers say about you as a person?*
  - *How might you answer these questions differently in your journal at home versus in class where others might hear your responses? Explain.*
3. Cue the DVD to the beginning of the film, Chapter 1, "News Media Coverage."

Note: This segment begins with a recap of the news media coverage of Matthew Shepard's murder and continues with a more intimate portrait of Matt the friend, brother, and son – through the eyes of the people who loved him and the things he held dear.

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4. Explain to the class that they are about to view a film clip that presents three versions of a person named Matt Shepard: one is how the outside world viewed him and another is how his family and friends knew him. A third presentation is how Matt felt about himself.
5. Distribute Student Handout: Me Through Different Lenses. Tell students to consider the similarities and differences between these three depictions, and as they watch, to record examples from the film in the appropriate column of the first chart on the handout. Examples might be objects, memories, experiences, or descriptions that are shared in the film.
6. Screen the first 18 minutes of the film, stopping at the end of Chapter 1.
7. For homework, students should complete the second chart on Student Handout: Me Through Different Lenses.

## DAY II

1. Before class begins, write the following prompt on the white board, chalk board, or on chart paper:

For man has closed himself up, till he sees  
all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.  
-William Blake

Note: For students for whom this quote might be a challenge, an alternative would be to write the following prompt: "We see things through the lens of our perspectives, and in this way, our perspectives create our perceptions of all that we see." Then, when conducting the large group discussion in procedure 3, use questions that do not solely apply to the Blake quotation, but can be used for a general discussion of how perspective shapes perception. To this end, you may substitute the word "lens" for "chinks" and "perspective" for "cavern" in your discussion.

2. Once students are seated, conduct a quick recap of yesterday's class, including the 20-minute segment they viewed from the film.

Note: To help students remember the segment, remind them that it started with news coverage of Matthew Shepard's death, followed by home video footage filmed by Matt's brother, and conversations with his friends, mom, and dad sharing their personal memories of Matt.

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3. Once context is established, ask the class what they think the quote on the board might mean. Conduct a short discussion using some or all of the following questions as a guide:

- *What does it mean to view someone through “chinks”? How does this type of view affect perception?*
- *According to Blake, why do people view each other through narrow chinks?*
- *According to Blake, why are people closed up in caverns?*
- *What might the caverns symbolize? What sorts of behaviors close us up?*
- *How does this quote relate to our classwork yesterday?*
- *How does it relate to the homework you completed last night?*
- *Do people who don’t know you see you through the “chinks” of their own “cavern”?*
- *Did people who didn’t know Matthew view him through “chinks”?*
- *How does this kind of limited perception affect you? How might these limited perceptions have affected Matthew?*
- *How does this quote relate to prejudice, or bias, or homophobia?*

4. Cue the DVD to Chapter 3, “What Happened in Laramie.”

Note: This segment tells the story of Matthew Shepard’s abduction, murder, and his death. It is important to note that the imagery, descriptions, and content in this segment might be disturbing to some viewers.

5. Explain to the class that they are about to view a film clip that explains what happened to Matthew Shepard the night he was murdered. Explain that some people might find this segment difficult to watch.
6. Screen the next 8 minutes of the film, stopping at the end of Chapter 3.
7. Allow 10 minutes for students to process the segment as a whole group. Alternatively, due to the disturbing nature of the clip, students may prefer to process the segment individually, in their journals, or in pairs. Use some or all of the following questions to guide students thinking (in large group discussion, silent writing, or pairs):
- *How did you feel watching this clip?*
  - *What thoughts went through your mind as you watched?*

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- *What reactions are you having now that you've seen what happened to Matthew? What questions do you have about what you saw?*
  - *Do you agree with Matt's friend Walt Boulden when he says that Matt was too trusting and that because he was gay he should have been more suspicious? What does this mentality say about our culture in general?*
8. For homework, ask students to reflect on the thinking and sharing they've done in class for the last two days – from exploring the different lenses we see each other (and ourselves) through, to today's writing prompt, to the segments of film they viewed. Students should write at least one page in their journal or on notepaper as a response to this reflection. What have they learned about themselves and others? How might these dynamics of perception and understanding relate to the story of Matthew Shepard's attack?

## DAY III

1. Draw the following graphic image of the "Evolution of a Hate Crime" on the white board, chalkboard, or on chart paper:

IGNORANCE → FEAR → ANGER → HATE/ RESENTMENT → DEHUMANIZATION → VIOLENCE

2. Break the class into 6 small groups of 3-5 students each. Assign each group one of the terms from the graphic image. Distribute Student Handout: Evolution of a Hate Crime to each student. As a group, students should discuss the prompts on their handouts. Each student should complete his or her own handout as part of his or her small group work. Allow 15 minutes for students to work in small groups.
3. After 15 minutes have elapsed, jigsaw the existing groups into 6 new groups; each new group comprised of one student from each of the former groups (so that each term is represented in the new group). Allow 10 minutes for the students in the new groups to share their answers with the others. In this way, all students will have time to discuss and learn about every term on the graphic.
4. After the groups have shared, reconvene as a whole class for a brief overview of the graphic. Ask the class how this graphic relates to the story of Matthew Shepard, and allow time for the class to discuss this together.
5. Cue the DVD to Chapter 5, "It was a Hate Crime."



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Note: This segment shows what happened in the aftermath of Matt's death. It shows how the public reacted with both compassion and vitriol, how his family and friends mourned, and how they used the anger of some people to make a difference. Tell the class that they will be viewing a segment of the film that shows how Matt's death affected Matt's family, friends, and the world at large.

6. Screen the next 18 minutes of the film to the end of Chapter 5.
7. For homework, students should write one page in their journal or notebook that explains how the graphic from today's class relates to Matt's life and death – how in his case, the cycle of hate was able to crescendo into the ultimate act of violence. As part of their writing, students should create a new graphic with callouts, highlighting examples from the film that align to each term on the graphic.

## DAY IV

1. Before class, cue the DVD to the beginning of Chapter 7, "The Right Kind of Tears."

Note: This segment depicts the ways in which Matt's friends and family have used their profound loss to move towards positive change and how they are – in his name and memory – trying to make a difference for other LGBTQ people in the world.

2. Begin class by telling students they will be viewing a video segment. This is the end of the film, *Matt Shepard is a Friend of Mine*, and it shows how the people closest to Matt were able to find a way for some good to come out of the tragedy of his death.
3. Screen the last 15 minutes of the film.
4. Conduct a short, whole-class discussion to debrief after the clip. Use some or all of the following questions to guide the discussion:
  - What do you think Father Roger means when he says there is a "right kind of tears.... A right kind of hurt"? Why does he want Michele and Matt's friends and family to "embrace it"?
  - Why do you think Father Roger says, "I hope you never lose being angry"? Why does he want Matt's friends to "remind the world to be angry" and "never heal"?
  - What experiences in your life are ones from which you hope you never heal?
  - How are Matt's friends each coping with his death and with their loss differently? How are they coping in similar ways?
  - Share an experience you've had where you turned a loss into a way to grow.



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5. Copy the graphic image of the “Evolution of a Hate Crime” onto the white board, chalkboard, or on chart paper:

IGNORANCE → FEAR → ANGER → HATE/ RESENTMENT → DEHUMANIZATION → VIOLENCE

6. Ask for a volunteer to explain how the clip they just watched relates to this graphic. Judy says that the men who killed her son “hated those they perceived to be different.” How does this quote relate to the graphic? Where on that graphic does this phenomenon fall? Explain.
7. Ask the class what they imagine can be done to interrupt the evolution from ignorance to violence. Then ask, based on the clip, what Dennis and Judy Shepard are doing to try to interrupt the evolution from anger and fear to violence. Elicit specific examples from the class. And as they offer answers, create a “word web” by graphing their responses on the white board, chalk board, or chart paper to the original graphic, showing where the efforts of the Shepards and Matt’s friends are actually interrupting this cycle of violence.
8. Return the class’s attention to the film clip they watched. Continue the whole-class discussion about the end of the film. Use some or all of the following questions to guide the discussion:
  - *What was the first way that Matt’s parents showed that they wanted to put healing first and foremost in the wake of their son’s death?*
  - *How did Dennis, Matt’s father, explain his process of healing in his court statement?*
  - *What did Judy, Matt’s mom, see as her small “window of opportunity”?*
  - *How is Dennis and Judy’s work a continuation of Matt’s life?*
  - *What is the importance of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr., Hate Crimes Prevention Act?*
  - *Why is it important to Matt’s friends to remember the “real” Matt, not just the symbol of “Matthew Shepard”? What do you see as the difference between the two?*
  - *How might things have been different if Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson had been able to see Matt as a person and connect with him as a human being? Do you think if they were able to know the “real Matt” they would have been less likely to dehumanize him and victimize him? Explain.*
  - *How is Matthew “still making a difference, long after he’s gone”?*
  - *What does Judy mean when she says that Matt’s “greatest legacy is a generation of advocates”?*
  - *How did Matt change the world?*

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9. Break the class into small groups of 4-6 students. Explain that they have just been discussing the opposite of the “Evolution of a Hate Crime.” Rather, they’ve been exploring how people actively interrupt that evolution to stave off bias. Give the class 10 minutes to work in their small groups to create their own graphic image, entitled “The Interruption of Bias.” Explain that this graphic can look however the group thinks it would best represent the dynamic (i.e., a straight line, a circle, a pie graph, bar graph, etc.).
10. Reconvene as a whole group. Allow time for the small groups to share their new graphics. As a culminating question, ask the class: how can we perpetrate understanding and acceptance, instead of perpetrating hate and fear? How can we intervene when we see things evolving in the wrong direction?
11. For homework, students should complete Student Handout: I Am as an interview with someone they don’t know very well. They can interview a peer, a teacher, or someone in their neighborhood. Complete the sentences based on their interviewee’s responses. After they’ve completed the interview, compare their assumptions with reality. Were the answers the ones they would have expected? Most importantly, how might the difference between expected responses and actual ones provide opportunities for miscommunication between people? How could they be used to present opportunities for connection, empathy, and understanding?
12. Take the learning to the next level by assigning the following long-term social action project prompts. Students can complete these for extra credit or in small groups for a project grade.
  - *If there isn’t one already, you can make a positive change in your community by starting a Gay/Straight Alliance. Learn how – and other ways to get involved – at [www.gsanetwork.org/get-involved](http://www.gsanetwork.org/get-involved).*
  - *LGBTQ youth are four times more likely to attempt suicide as their straight peers. Become part of the solution by supporting the Trevor Project – an organization dedicated to crisis intervention for LGBTQ youth. Find out more at [www.thetrevorproject.org/section/get-involved](http://www.thetrevorproject.org/section/get-involved).*
  - *Make your voice matter by signing a petition on [www.change.org](http://www.change.org). There are thousands of petitions that need support – from offering workplace protections to LGBTQ people, to revising textbooks, to ensuring that relevant health information is available to LGBTQ students at school. Sign on and sign your name to help facilitate change.*
  - *Become a supporter of GLAAD. This national organization works through news, entertainment, and digital media to accelerate acceptance of the LGBT community and has openings for volunteers and interns. You can find out more and get involved at [www.glaad.org](http://www.glaad.org).*

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- Viewers are introduced to The Matthew Shepard Foundation at the end of the film. Matt's parents founded this organization in his memory with the mission to empower individuals to embrace human dignity and diversity through outreach, advocacy, and resource programs, and to replace hate with understanding, compassion, and acceptance. The Foundation's online community for LGBTQ+ youth is at [www.matthewsplace.org](http://www.matthewsplace.org). The site hosts resources, blogs, local support listings, and other important content for young people looking for help, support, and answers.
- Facing History and Ourselves is an organization that works with educators around the world to improve their effectiveness in the classroom, as well as their students' academic performance, historical understanding, and civic learning. One of their resources that can help learners and educators to process around the topic of bullying is: [www.facinghistory.org/content/bullying-and-ostracism-resource-collection](http://www.facinghistory.org/content/bullying-and-ostracism-resource-collection).

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## STUDENT HANDOUT: I AM

DIRECTIONS: Complete the following statements based on your own personal experiences, attitudes, opinions, and beliefs.

I am \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I love \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I am not \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I think about \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I want \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**DIRECTIONS:** Utilize the first chart as a viewing log, filling in examples as you watch the film. Complete the second chart as a reflection on your own experiences with perceptions and personas.

HOW HIS FRIENDS AND FAMILY SAW MATT	HOW THE OUTSIDE WORLD SAW MATTHEW	HOW MATT SAW HIMSELF
HOW MY FRIENDS AND FAMILY SEE ME	HOW THE OUTSIDE WORLD SEES ME	HOW I SEE MYSELF

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## STUDENT HANDOUT: EVOLUTION OF A HATE CRIME

**DIRECTIONS:** Together with your group, answer the following questions about your assigned term from the graphic below.

IGNORANCE → FEAR → ANGER → HATE/ RESENTMENT → DEHUMANIZATION → VIOLENCE

### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Establish a working definition for your term, including both denotations and connotations.
2. Identify 2 examples of your term from the film *Matt Shepard is a Friend of Mine*.
3. Explain how your term plays a role in the cultural phenomenon of bias.
4. List 2 or more examples of your term based on your own experience, the news, or other sources.
5. How might we, as individuals or a society, work to interrupt this cycle of violence?  
List at least one specific way this cycle could be broken and where on the graphic image (where in the cycle) it could happen.