

Piecing Together The Puzzle

By Stephanie Shaw

It has been said that those who do not learn from their past are doomed to repeat history's mistakes. Unfortunately for us in the GLBT community, certain aspects of our history have never been well documented, leaving us with few tools to right some of history's wrongs. This is especially true when looking at the issue of gay homicide. Luckily, in Minnesota we now have an organization unlike any other in the country. The Center for Homicide Research, which was co-founded by Joe Shulka, President, and Dallas Drake, Principal Homicide Researcher and incorporated in 1999, is the most comprehensive research project focusing on the subject of gay homicide, with a database unlike any other in existence. They were formerly known as the Minnesota Gay Homicide Study. The name change reflects their current status as a national organization.

In the early 1990's, Dallas Drake, then a Burnsville firefighter, was bothered by several high profile homicide cases, where gay people were the victims, including the case of murdered former state senator John Chenoweth. Drake wondered how many such cases were out there, and started to assemble names of all the gay homicide victims he could find. Before long, he had a list of 65 names – a list that he felt compelled to do something with – he just didn't know quite what. He asked himself, "What do I do with this? File it? Look at it? What?" It kept gnawing at him, so he started making inquiries,

her for a meeting at the FBI headquarters to talk with a group of people who get together regularly to discuss homicide issues. So, he headed out to Quantico with her, sat down, kept an open mind and listened. Finally, he started talking to people there, "I've got this list that I don't know what to do with." Each time he told someone new about it, they got excited. After hearing people say, "You've got to do something with that list," several times, he knew he had something important.

Drake's original list was made up of only gay homicide victims. However, early on in his venture, Drake was advised that the most important thing to remember about criminology was to study three things; victims, offenders and incidents. This came from noted expert Roland Chilton, University of Massachusetts Amherst professor and President-elect of the American Society of Criminology.

Drake broadened his focus to include all aspects of gay homicide, for a truer slice of reality. Drake noted, "There is a hypothesis out there that victims look a lot like offenders, in other words, there's not much difference between a victim and an offender. Their ages are often similar, the places they live are similar, there are many ways that they are like each other. And so when we say of an offender, 'Fry the SOB,' who we're really talking about is a GLBT person, whether or not they have been labeled that way in the media. In a case of gay homicide, who ends up victim and who ends up offender in this type of altercation, is almost decided by the flip of a coin." When Drake started looking at the many and varied facets of gay homicide, he began to see a very different picture than what he expected to see.

A heterosexual crime researcher once asked Drake what he could possibly learn about gay homicide that wasn't already known as a result of studying heterosexual murder? Drake responded, "We don't know. We've never looked before. Right now, there is no way to look, because we don't gather data on gay homicide in the U.S."

Drake then explained to LivingOUT, "That's one of the main



focuses of our work – to gather data so that we can actually find out how similar or different gay homicide is compared to other homicide. From our preliminary findings, it appears that gay homicide is very unique. On our web site we list nine indicators of gay homicide. We get phone calls from police investigators based on that list. The last detective who called me had seven of the nine of those total indicators."

Joe Shulka, co-founder of the Center for Homicide Research then added, "It made the detective think completely differently. He was pretty sure he was looking at a homicide with a GLBT element, but as soon as he found our web site, he said, 'Now I know what to look for. Now I know who to talk to.'"

"Why study gay homicide?" continued Shulka. "I think there is a popularly held myth that all the available information on all homicides is stored in some massive set of databases at the FBI, and that we've got this information at our fingertips anytime we want it. That's only partially true. There is a great deal of information gathered that filters up at the local, state and national levels that is good, but it's not complete. There are gaping holes. And one of these holes is the GLBT element. So if there was a flagrant lesbian triple homicide here in Minneapolis, it would show up in the local police report. You would probably even see it a bit further up the line, but as this information moves up the food chain into larger collections, there is no place to store that information, there is no gay variable. It is lost. So if you try to research it years later and say, 'Where is that case now?' it's been melded in with the national information and you



Photos by David Franciola

sure that somewhere there was a place that collected data on gay homicides – that there was someone out there who researched the subject. However, after being re-directed from one person to another numerous times, he eventually realized that there was nothing out there.

He finally talked to someone at the University of Wisconsin who did homicide research. She invited him to join

can't look it up. There is no place to store it. And if there's no place to store it, there is no way to do the research – no way to do a compare and contrast. That's one of the reasons why we've had to do our work to start supplementing what's out there. Again, why research gay homicide? – Would you ask the same thing if we were collecting racial data or gender data? Homicides against women look totally different than homicides against men. What if we didn't collect gender data in homicides? What could we possibly know about female homicide ...about male homicide?"

Drake then added, "There is this demographic category out there of GLBT people. We have to constantly keep in mind what we are looking at and why. If a person can be in a demographic category of gay, lesbian, transsexual or bisexual then we should collect data on that to find out if we are more at risk or less at risk for homicide. Then, what is it that puts us at risk? Because ultimately, that is going to lead us to how we can prevent victimization in the future."

Drake and Shulka have a daunting task before them. They must piece together a mammoth jigsaw puzzle of scattered and hidden information. "We're starting below the ground level," noted Drake. "No one has ever done this before. No one can tell us exactly how to do it. Homicide researchers can tell us how to research homicide. GLBT people can tell us about the culture and the community. The violent crime experts can tell us about what some of the violence looks like. We are left to pull all these things in from different directions. Even though we realize that we will never have complete information, we do have enough to make some judgments. We caution that what we know about anything is partial. Whatever statistics we have, there will always be shortcomings. But, we have by far and large the most complete GLBT homicide dataset in Minnesota – in the country." When there is a question about gay homicide from anyone in the US (or the world), people end up coming to the Center for Homicide Research for assistance.

There are two distinct things that separate the work of Drake and Shulka from other work that has been done on other homicide projects. Shulka explained, "First, we are actively seeking out information. Many other lists or databases are very reactive. They are lists gathered when people call in with information – passively reporting. We actively seek out information on gay homicides. The other piece is the structure of how we build the data. A lot of the lists that we have found are just that – a list of names and dates. There is no useable information there. Ours is a research database. There are approximately 125 variables – everything from place and location to weapon to all the offender information to the relationship. We include all of the complex information that really builds the incident – what happened, who it happened to, how it happened, what the response of the community was." Once this database matrix is proofed,

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Drake and Shulka hope it will become a valuable research tool. When it is finalized, they plan for it to be put into a national repository of research information so that other organizations can query their data, find access to do their own compare and contrast in their own research.

There are several phases to this project that Drake and Shulka have undertaken. First, they must constantly work to develop and add to the database. Second, they complete day-by-day case reviews for homicide detectives on active cases. Third, they write research papers that are presented to conferences so that they can keep their toes in the academic waters. Fourth, they offer internships to detail-oriented researchers. The fifth piece is education. There is a need for the information that they can provide in the law enforcement and criminal justice community. They create a safe space for law enforcement professionals to ask questions and to receive impartial answers to their questions. Although they are not criminal profilers, Drake and Shulka are sometimes able to provide law enforcement professionals with accurate information about the offender, before the offender has even been apprehended. They also offer officers other valuable information, giving them appropriate questions to ask, and letting them know when to ask them during interviews with offenders, thus helping law enforcement build and solidify criminal cases.

When asked if GLBT people are safer from homicide now than they were ten years ago, Drake offered a surprising response. "Yes, I think we are safer now than we were ten years ago. I would also say that we have never been unsafe. But at the time, we didn't know that. There is violence in the community, but we're not seeing it from homicide. Are GLBT people murdered? Sure. But from what we are seeing based on the data, gay people are disproportionately unaffected by homicide. In other words, we're at less risk for homicide than other people. If it were not for hate crime, we'd be similar to Asians. Asians have very little homicide risk. Nobody really understands exactly why. But with GLBT people, the most risk for homicide has to do to some degree with hate crime. If you took hate crime out of the equation, there would be very, very low homicide in the GLBT community. With hate crime included in the statistics, there is much more gay homicide, but it is still less prevalent than with heterosexual persons."

Another surprising fact that Drake and Shulka shared with LivingOUT was that most gay murders are gay on gay crimes. Drake supposed, "The issue is not to argue with the facts. The question is, how can we, knowing the facts, deal with this? What we are really looking at is a severe form of internalized homophobia where GLBT people are not able to cope with the fact that that's who they are. Somehow, we've got to figure out how we can save these people – not just the

victims, but also the offenders. Every time there is a homicide, we are losing two people from our community, if what I am seeing is correct. The guy who killed John Chenoweth (Jay Johnson), came out in the film, 'License To Kill' by Arthur Dong and said, 'Yeah – I know now that I'm a homosexual. But I didn't understand it at the time and I couldn't deal with my own sexuality. The only thing I could figure out to do was to get rid of all the homosexuals so I'd feel better.'" Shulka noted, "Many of the people who are offending could be active, productive members of society if they had a healthy transition and a good understanding of themselves. Now, the whole notion of the evil other group of people who want to hurt us changes considerably. As a community we have fallen into the trap that we are so radically different from them. And they are a threat to us. As a community, we haven't come to a healthy turn and brought people up to speed."

Of course, whether perpetrated by gay or straight offenders, hate crime is still a fact of life for GLBT people. Drake noted, "The power of hate crime is that when any other crime occurs and you are a part of a community that is targeted for hate crime, you're always wondering, Is this a hate crime too? That's the power of hate crime. It reaches out way beyond the initial crime." Shulka added to Drake's line of thought, "When a homicide occurs, there is the law of unintended consequences, where many people in the community, in the broadest sense of the word community, see it as a hate crime. Whether that was the intention behind the act or not, those messages are being received - we are at risk; we could be killed - we could be the next victim. And it's that ripple that goes out in a negative way, no matter what the intention was, that creates a scary and dangerous place for our community to be in."

Drake finished by saying, "Our goal is to eventually stop all this from happening anymore. In the meantime, we hope to increase the solvability rates. But the ultimate goal is to prevent homicide. There is no reason there should be this many homicides. There shouldn't be any." The Center for Homicide Research is an all-volunteer organization. Dallas Drake is currently enrolled at the University of Minnesota pursuing a degree in Sociology as a full time student in the Honors Program while working full time for the organization. Joe Shulka, who has been involved with nonprofit management for over 15 years, works full time, but has also managed to work three-quarters time doing gay homicide research. If it were not for the thousands of volunteer hours that these two men and their many interns are able to clock in, this research would not be happening, and valuable information would be lost.

If you are interested in volunteer opportunities, or in donating to this organization, as this type of research can be very expensive to do, please check out their web site: www.chronline.org. To contact the Center For Homicide Research, send an email to info@CHRONline.org.

