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Studying gay homicides is firefighter's new pursuit

by John Gessner
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Examine Dallas Drake's life pursuits and you'll see markers of his personal identity not far behind.

As a kid he wanted to be a fireman, a dream he never outgrew. Drake was certified by age 18 and has been a full-time firefighter in Burnsville since 1982.

He learned as a young man he was gay, finally coming out to his Fire Department colleagues in 1989. Again Drake turned identity into action — as an AIDS activist, photojournalist in the gay press and lecturer on issues of gay and lesbian culture.

Now, at age 40, Drake is leaving firefighting for a new pursuit — criminology study of homicides in the gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender community. He is leaving the Fire Department Aug. 27 to pursue his undergraduate studies full time, with the eventual goal of earning a doctorate and possibly teaching criminology at a university.

"It's activism in a more measured way," Drake said. "I don't go to street demonstrations any more. I'm just changing my life work. The murder of

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any person diminishes the value of our entire community."

Murders of gay people — whether high-profile hate crimes or crimes of less-evident motive — have struck a chord with Drake since 1977, when he read the news of a young man beaten to death with a baseball bat on the edge of Minneapolis' Loring Park.

In 1991 he shot photos for Equal Time, a now-defunct GLBT publication, of police searching for a bullet in the killing of another gay man in Loring Park.

"I'm looking through a viewfinder and I'm seeing the effect a homicide has on people," said Drake, who lives in Minneapolis with Joe Shulka, his partner of 10 years. "I wanted to know, how many of these homicides are there? I started asking around. Nobody could answer me. That kind of launched me on a mission to find out. Since then I'm no longer a photojournalist, I'm a

researcher."

And Drake, whose early start on a firefighting career precluded him from ever earning an undergraduate degree, has begun establishing solid research credentials.

Two years ago Drake attended a conference of the Homicide Research Working Group (HRWG), an organization comprised mostly of academics working in criminology and behavioral sciences.

In June, Drake attended his second HRWG conference, in Orlando, Fla., this time presenting preliminary findings and a research proposal for his Minnesota Gay Homicide Study.

The study is an outgrowth of research into gay homicide begun in 1992 by Drake and a handful of volunteers, including crime-victim advocates at the Gay Lesbian Community Action Council (now Outfront Minnesota).

See Drake, 14A

Drake/From 9A

Drake is attempting to compile a complete record of homicides of GLBT people in Minnesota over the last 30 years. The study also seeks to compile information on killers of gay people.

"We're looking at trying to increase case solvability," Drake said. A critical component of examining gay homicide is accurately recognizing and labeling cases as gay in order to explore the "unique dimensions and qualities" of this "subcategory of homicide," Drake wrote in a 1999 paper.

"Homosexual homicides are particularly difficult to solve," said Drake, who estimates that there are three to five such crimes annually in Minnesota.

"I do feel personally affected by these homicides," he said. "It's one of the things that kept me from coming out at an earlier age, because I'd heard about some of these murders. ... It's not as dangerous today to come out. But people are still drastically affected by these homicides."