



OPINION

Jason Collins, No.98 and Matthew Shephard

By [Stephen Jimenez](#)

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More than 15 years after gay college student Matthew Shepard was beaten to death on the outskirts of Laramie, Wyo., pro basketball player Jason Collins of the Brooklyn Nets has given Shepard's October 1998 murder potent new meaning.

By wearing No. 98 on his jersey, Collins is honoring Shepard's memory and bravely bearing witness to his own identity as an openly gay athlete in the NBA.

Before coming out publicly, Collins wore No. 98 with the Celtics and Wizards last season, but his tribute to Shepard was silent and closeted then. Only Collins' friends and family knew what the number meant to him.

No. 98 jerseys have become the top-seller at NBAStore.com, and Collins and the NBA are to be commended for announcing they'll donate proceeds from sales, and from auctioned jerseys worn by Collins in games, to two charities, the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network and the Matthew Shepard Foundation.

As a Brooklyn native and gay man of Hispanic and African-American roots who has been "out" for nearly 40 years and been active in numerous LGBT causes, I'm proud that our movement is increasingly demonstrating the hard-won self-confidence embodied by Collins, NFL prospect Michael Sam, and others. It's a strong sign of how far we've come. But as a journalist who spent the better part of 13 years researching Matthew Shepard's murder, I'm aware that there are more challenging complexities to this landmark tragedy.

When Collins met with Shepard's parents after a Nets game in Denver, Fox News.com's description of Shepard's murder was representative of media accounts just about everywhere: "Shepard was tortured and murdered in 1998 because he was gay." This has been the accepted understanding of that gruesome crime since it first occurred.

The media began reporting the attack on Shepard as an anti-gay hate crime while the 21-year-old was still fighting for his life in the hospital, before the police had even launched an investigation.

In fact, Shepard's killer, Aaron McKinney, didn't first meet Shepard and learn he was gay the night he "lured" him from a bar. The two young men had bought and sold methamphetamine together; they'd partied together and they'd *had sex* together — McKinney was a closeted bisexual.

McKinney was coming down from a weeklong meth bender the night he attacked Shepard; in the same 24-hour period he brutally assaulted three "straight" men, one of them his accomplice, Russell Henderson, when Henderson tried to stop the beating.

Cal Rerucha, the prosecutor who put McKinney and Henderson away for life, is convinced the murder resulted from a drug-related robbery gone tragically wrong.

None of these details diminishes the important symbolic message Jason Collins is conveying by wearing No. 98. All of us can sympathize with how much Shepard's murder meant to Collins as a college student, and what it still means to him. Violence, hatred and homophobia of many varieties still exist in our society, and must be confronted unflinchingly.

But the truth of the Shepard tragedy has many complex facets to it, and it's in the long-term best interest of the LGBT community — and all Americans — to understand them.

In 1998 when Matthew Shepard was killed, Wyoming and several other states were in the early throes of a meth epidemic that has had a catastrophic impact on the nation over the last decade and a half. Simultaneously, a wave of crystal-meth abuse had begun to sweep through urban gay enclaves — mostly unchecked at the time.

As a lucky survivor of the plague years of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, who watched the majority of my gay male friends fall to the disease, I grew very alarmed when I learned that studies were showing higher rates of HIV transmission among those using crystal meth. I recalled the simple moral code that had helped many of us survive the earlier epidemic: SILENCE=DEATH.

As a journalist and gay man, I could not, in good conscience, remain silent about the drug underpinnings and other entanglements that I gradually uncovered around Matthew Shepard's grotesquely violent murder. To unquestioningly accept the popular myth about how and why he was killed means that we also avoid, at our own peril, questioning the other critical issues involved in his tragedy — and hence our society at large.

Stephen Jimenez is the author of "The Book of Matt: Hidden Truths about the Murder of Matthew Shepard."