

Published July 22, 2021. Editor's headline: "It's Dangerous to be gay in Wyoming"

"We're leaving Cheyenne," gay friends recently told me. "Moving east," she added. Lynn and her partner have been my friends for some six years.

I knew the possibility had been on their back burner, but why now?

"The bigotry is getting to us," said Lynn. "My spouse and I are legally married, have been since We love our dogs. I served in the army. Now that I'm retired, I work deferred maintenance for homeowners. My spouse is employed with a Cheyenne firm. We just want to live our lives like everyone else. Do you know, a study released in 2020 listed the 50 states, starting with 50 as the least favorable to the LGBTQ community? Wyoming was 49 after Alabama."

Wyoming used to be characterized as the "small town with long streets," wit attendant emphasis on neighborly disposition and small population. Not any more. These days Wyoming is in the news for hate crimes and homophobia. NBC News recently posted a lengthy article online that covers the state's dismal record on the issue. Going back to the 1998 torture and murder of gay University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard, the article notes that Shepard's death set off a national movement for hate crime legislation. Despite the pleas of various nonpartisan commissions, small businesses, and the LGBTQ community, Wyoming lawmakers have failed to enact such a law.

Nearly every state has a hate-crime law but not Wyoming, states The Washington Post in an article about the infamous T-shirts, advocating violence against LGBTQ people, that sold until recently at a bar in Cheyenne. The WP adds that Shepard's memory was invoked in 2009 when the U.S. Congress passed the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act. The law, co-named for a black man murdered by white supremacists in Texas, strengthened federal law enforcement's ability to investigate and prosecute hate crimes, including those committed against people on the basis of their sexual orientation.

In May 2016, High Country News published an article by Nathan C. Martin, "It's still dangerous to be gay in Wyoming," with a subtitle of "Anti-gay violence in Wyoming is real, and it deserves a real response." The writer mentions a 2001 encounter in Rock Springs. He and friends were hanging out in a trailer house when "a queer couple we knew showed up, saying a bunch of rednecks had been chasing them down Elk Street." Soon four pickup trucks arrived and an all-out brawl ensued. "There were more of us than there were of them," the writer notes drily. The troublemakers got run off.

Martin lived elsewhere for a dozen years, then moved back to Wyoming. He next mentions an incident in 2015, when five young men attacked a high school student, Trevor O'Brien, a gay

Native American. At age twenty, O'Brien killed himself in Gillette. The harassment got to Trevor, said the distraught parents.

In mid-July of this year, WyoFile posted a report in its online publication, "Gillette grapples with anti-LGBTQ bigotry." For their summer programming, the WyoFile writer explains, trustees at the Campbell County Library booked Magician Mikayla Oz, a well-regarded entertainer who has built a career performing hundreds of shows for family audiences across the Midwest.

"But there would be no magic in Gillette this week," the WyoFile writer continues.

The day before she was set to perform, Oz — who was slated for dozens of shows around the region this month, including four in Campbell County — was forced to cancel, citing numerous threats from the community. "You ain't f**king welcome in Gillette," a community member emailed Oz. "If you come here, there's going to be issues," another told her in a phone call. "With great regret, regret shared by [the] Campbell County Public Library System, Oz canceled her programs in Gillette and Wright due to safety concerns for herself and library patrons," the library announced in a release. Oz, a transgender woman from Iowa, got caught in a controversy between the Campbell County Library and a community group that opposed the library's Pride Month book display. The group falsely accused library management of using "taxpayer money" for the Oz booking.

The friends I mentioned at outset? Six years ago, when I moved 50 miles north, the couple bought my home in Cheyenne. Since then, and despite the drive, Lynn has helped with projects around my new home. The couple sheltered my dog when I traveled by plane, as I recently did to a family affair in California. These friends will be sorely missed. They brought a welcome spark of diversity to Cheyenne.