

Testimony of
Janet Langhart Cohen

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Statement of Janet Langhart Cohen
Playwright/Producer, The Anne & Emmett Project
President and CEO, Langhart Communications, LLC
Before The Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate

Hearing: “The Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009”

Presented Thursday, June 25, 2009

Thank you Chairman Leahy and Ranking Member Sessions for asking me to speak before this distinguished Committee this morning.

I regret that my dear friend Senator Ted Kennedy isn't present today, for he is dearly missed. He and his family have been stalwart leaders in the struggle for justice and civil rights.

I also regret that we are having to speak this morning about Hate in this society.

Sadly, it is a subject I know only too well. I know that hate kills individuals, leaves families hurt with wounds that never heal, and afflicts communities with no sense of security leaving them wondering if and when they will become the next victim.

I had a cousin lynched long before I was born. The story of that lynching has been told so often, I feel as though I was there. Those who spoke of the story are now long gone, yet it is still very much a part of me, because I remember it.

In the Summer of 1955, I was 14 years old pondering what high school to attend, when word came up from Money, Mississippi that a young Black boy, the same age as I, by the name of Emmett Till was murdered for whistling at a White woman.

That hatred personally jolted my sense of security and my sense of self, as a young person. When we learned that the men got away with such brutality, it told me what my country thought of me as a person of color.

I watched my Mother be overly protective of my younger brother for fear he would be next.

As an adult, I felt the result of Hate again when my dear friend and mentor, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated.

If anyone of you thought Hate was a relic of the past, we were once again reminded of its devastation just a little more than two weeks ago when a White supremacist killed a Black man at a Jewish Shrine, the Holocaust Museum. It were as if the Hate of Adolf Hitler and Jim Crow had come to life with a single bullet, piercing the heart of Officer Stephen Tyrone Johns.

The cruel irony was that this murder happened just hours before my play about hate was to debut there at the Museum.

My play, "Anne & Emmett" is an imaginary conversation between two tragic victims of hate, Anne Frank and Emmett Till.

I was in route to the Museum for the final rehearsal when my husband Bill Cohen called me to say that there had been a shooting and that he was just 30 feet away from the shots, Hate was way too close that day.

It was all too surreal for me, going from opening night jitters, to murderous Hate at the Museum.

"Anne & Emmett" tells of the parallels and commonalities of Hate that each of these two historic teenagers experienced. They lived in societies that allowed Hate to murder them.

My play is a call to action, to have our society not be silent witnesses and bystanders, but to act.

I call on you today to act! To pass this hate crimes legislation that is expanded to include those of us who are the most vulnerable.

Those vulnerable because of our race, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identification...those of us who are disabled and physically challenged.

And while you may not find yourself representing any of those groups, you're not safe either when Hate decides to strike.

Please give our Attorney General, his prosecutors, and their state and local partners laws that empower them to protect all who are vulnerable and bring justice on our behalf.

Thank you.

Attorney General Eric Holder, Janet Langhart Cohen, Gail Heriot, Brian Walsh, Reverend Mark Achtemeier, Michael Lieberman
The Honorable Patrick Leahy, The Honorable Benjamin L. Cardin