

LIMITED DRAMA SERIES · 7 EPISODES

BEFORE THE FENCE

He built a career telling the truth while hiding his own.

A prestige drama about identity, performance, and the cost of silence in late 1990s America.

Created by Joseph Cockrell · Inspired by Actual Events



“

I was a closeted gay man covering a hate crime committed against a man for being exactly who I was.

— Joseph Cockrell, Creator



In the late 1990s, Joseph Cockrell was part of a television news team sent to cover the aftermath of Matthew Shepard's murder.

Like Jasper Allen, the series' protagonist, he was a young broadcast journalist finding his footing in the fast-moving world of TV news. And like Jasper, he was also a closeted gay man.

“Standing behind a camera while covering a hate crime that shocked the nation, documenting the grief of the LGBTQ+ community while privately carrying the same fears, made professional detachment emotionally impossible. I remember standing beside satellite news trucks in Wyoming, listening to reporters debate objectivity while protestors screamed vile slurs at the Shepard family. At a funeral.”

Before the Fence is what that experience became. This story could only come from lived experience.

THE SERIES

Jasper Allen is a closeted television reporter whose meteoric rise is powered by a dangerous skill: performing with absolute composure while suppressing everything that is real about himself. He is the rare kind of reporter who becomes more composed as chaos escalates.

But as his professional visibility grows through the turbulent final years of the 1990s, so does the cost of the one truth he can never report: his own.

When a traumatic personal loss and the assignment to cover Matthew Shepard's murder finally collide, Jasper must decide whether the life he's built on silence is worth protecting, or a prison he can no longer survive.

7 EPISODES · LIMITED SERIES

The red light of the camera is the same mechanism as the closet door.



When the red light turns ON, Jasper becomes the person the world trusts: calm, authoritative, present. His greatest professional instrument. When it turns OFF, the man behind it must keep performing anyway. The camera has trained him so thoroughly in self-erasure that he no longer knows how to stop. His deepest personal wound.

Every breaking news assignment becomes a psychological ambush forcing Jasper to report on a version of the truth he is hiding. The TV station transforms Jasper into a local hero while erasing the truth about himself.

It's not just a personal choice for Jasper to hide that he's gay. The "morals and conduct" clause requires it.

1

IOWA · 1995–1996

The Golden Boy

Jasper comes of age as a journalist and begins a passionate secret relationship with Mason Smith, a college wrestler whose own fear of exposure ultimately fractures them. He signs a contract with a morals clause. He builds a career on the performance of a man who has nothing to hide.

2

DENVER · 1996–1998

The Life He Almost Had

Jasper meets Zach Nagle, openly gay, entirely himself, and builds a life that feels thrillingly normal for the first time. Chemistry. Romance. Joy. Jasper learns to experience intimacy without fear. When Zach is killed in a Valentine's Day car accident, Jasper must grieve in secrecy. The loss nearly destroys him.

3

WYOMING & CHICAGO · 1998–2000

The Other Side

Assigned to cover Matthew Shepard's murder, an emotionally hollowed-out Jasper arrives in Wyoming already near collapse. He is forced to report on a hate crime against a man whose only crime was being who Jasper is afraid to be. It breaks him. What follows is not tragedy. It is the slow, necessary work of becoming honest.

JASPER ALLEN

Closeted television reporter · Rising national star · Iowa to Denver to Chicago, with a detour in Wyoming.

ON CAMERA

Calm. Authoritative. Trusted. The kind of reporter who stands steady while the world breaks around him. Audiences see their son, their brother. They trust that man completely. He craves professional visibility while fearing personal exposure.

OFF CAMERA

Guarded. Performing. Jasper has spent years engineering a version of himself optimized for television. In private, moments with Zach allow him glimpses of the life he actually wants. But the more successful he becomes, the harder that life becomes to hold onto.

AT THE FENCE

Jasper arrives in Wyoming already carrying devastating grief. The vitriol at the funeral strips away his professional armor. That night, standing at the fence where Matthew was left to die, he breaks completely. What follows is the slow and painful process of learning how to live honestly.

Jasper is not a coward. He is a man who knows that hiding was the only way to survive in a cutthroat industry.

MASON SMITH

First Love · Iowa & Chicago

Jasper's college best friend and first love. Not cruel. Genuinely in love, but terrified of what that love would cost him. He doesn't just fear exposure. He wants the ordinary Midwestern life he was taught to value. Proposes to his girlfriend in front of everyone. Returns years later, outed by his own unraveling, finally willing to live honestly. Their reunion inverts everything. While Mason is the one who slams the door in 1995, he is the one who leads Jasper toward living his truth in 2000.

ZACH NAGLE

The Love of His Life · Denver

An openly gay law student. Zach moves through the world with a freedom Jasper experiences as both intoxicating and terrifying. He makes Jasper laugh in his own home. He makes being alive feel uncomplicated. Gives him a Tag Heuer watch engraved J+Z. Dies on Valentine's Day. Everything that follows runs on his absence.

BETH HERNANDEZ

Photojournalist · Denver

Proudly out. Deeply principled. Beth understands how television manufactures trust and has no patience for the compromises it demands. She sees through Jasper's constructed persona from day one and chooses not to press. Her refusal to collude in his silence becomes its own form of care. The person most likely to say the thing no one else will.

KIM VON

News Director · Denver

A realist who recognizes Jasper's rare quality on camera and protects it at all costs. Knows he is gay. Buries the truth under a hero narrative. Kim protects Jasper partly out of care and partly because she understands his image is commercially valuable. Her pragmatism comes with a moral price she doesn't fully account for.

GENE WATKINS

News Director · Iowa (Pilot Only)

Tells Jasper: when the red light is on, you stay a ghost. Intended as professional wisdom. For Jasper, it becomes permission to disappear. Though Gene exits after the pilot, his voice never does. Jasper hears it every time the red light comes on.

Every event is chosen because it forces Jasper to report on a version of his own story. Each assignment forces Jasper to publicly report on fears he privately lives with.

1996

G-8 Summit Protests · Denver

The armor that makes Jasper trusted on camera is the same armor he uses to survive being gay in a newsroom.

1998

Super Bowl Riot · Denver

He is filmed by a rival TV station punching a rioter who injured Zach. Kim makes Jasper into a hero. The man he was protecting was his Zach, his partner. The lie becomes a trap.

1999

Columbine · Colorado

By the time he covers Columbine, he has survived Zach's death, a mental breakdown, and a suicide attempt. Columbine does not break him. It reveals he was already broken.

1998–99

The Murder of Matthew Shepard

The thematic backbone and horizon the series inexorably moves towards. A watershed moment that transformed a quiet Wyoming town into the center of a media firestorm. Jasper reports from the front lines at the hospital in Fort Collins, at the funeral in Casper with hateful protestors, and then the trial in Laramie where the "Action Angels" appear.

E P I S O D E G U I D E

● EP 01 · “The Golden Boy” · Iowa, 1995

Jasper’s tornado broadcast makes him a star. It goes national overnight. He signs a morals clause. Jasper confesses his love, but Mason proposes to someone else. Smash to black.

● EP 02 · “First Times” · Denver, 1996

Jasper arrives broken, buries himself in work. A Halloween blizzard traps him with Zach Nagle, the first person he allows himself to feel anything for since Mason.

● EP 03 · “Off the Record” · Denver, 1996–97

Jasper and Zach escape to Chicago, where for the first time Jasper allows himself to live openly in public. But when the illusion cracks, the relationship suffers its first real wound.

● EP 04 · “Valentine” · Denver, 1997–98

Zach gives Jasper a watch engraved “J+Z”. The Super Bowl riot makes Jasper a hero. But it’s also a trap. On Valentine’s Day, Jasper recognizes Zach’s Jeep at a fatal accident scene.

● EP 05 · “The Fence” · Wyoming, 1998

Jasper covers Shepard’s death and funeral. The victim is a mirror of himself. Hateful protestors screaming “God Hates Fag” crush his emotions. At the fence in Laramie that night, he breaks completely. He makes a quiet, devastating decision.

● EP 06 · “Survivor” · Denver → Chicago, 1999

Therapy. Columbine. Jasper rescues a puppy from a flood; the first time a public moment reflects something emotionally true about him. A job offer in Chicago. Mason on a street corner, saying three words for the first time: I am gay.

● EP 07 · “The Other Side” · Chicago, 1999–2000

Jasper is shot during a robbery. Watch stolen. Mason hunts down the watch, the last physical object connecting Jasper to Zach. Jasper covers the McKinney trial, Judy Shepard’s speech, and drives to Iowa to tell his family the truth.

The world of the series exists in two visual registers.

THE NEWSROOM

90s Newsroom realism. Kinetic. Mechanical. Immediate. Handheld cameras. CRT monitor glow. Fluorescent newsroom light. Satellite trucks humming beneath sodium-vapor parking lot lamps. The relentless countdown to air. The camera becomes most stable when Jasper is emotionally least stable. Live broadcasts are shot with precision and momentum, reflecting the professional machine Jasper has mastered. He thrives here because the rules are absolute: red light on, report the story.

HIS PRIVATE LIFE

Still. Intimate. Unscripted. Dim interiors. Winter light. Reflections in darkened windows and bathroom mirrors. Long silences without the protection of performance. Away from the newsroom, Jasper loses the structure that allows him to function. The visual language becomes quieter, more observational, and emotionally exposed. The contrast between these worlds is the architecture of the series..

RECURRING MOTIFS



The Red Light

Every scene knows whether it's on or off. So does Jasper.



Mirrors & Glass

Reflective surfaces split the frame, the public figure and the private man visible simultaneously.



The Tag Heuer Watch

Engraved J+Z. A love Jasper was never allowed to name. The series' most intimate object.



The Fence

Split-rail fences frame Jasper behind barriers throughout. In the finale, his car passes one. He keeps driving.



The Sonic Landscape

Newsroom: propulsive, mechanical. Private life: 1990s pop, a world that kept reaching for joy whether you were allowed to join it or not.

COMPARABLE SERIES

Before the Fence combines the emotional intimacy of Fellow Travelers with the institutional urgency of The Newsroom.

Angels in America · HBO

TONAL LINEAGE

Both follow men destroyed by silence during a specific American crisis. Restrained where Angels is operatic but rooted in the same conviction: survival must be earned.

Fellow Travelers · Showtime / Paramount+

LGBTQ+ HISTORICAL PARALLEL

Both explore the personal cost of living closeted within powerful institutions. Rooted in historical specificity, emotional restraint, and the collision between private desire and public consequence.

The Newsroom · HBO

NEWSROOM WORLD

Shares the kinetic journalism environment and moral conviction. The Newsroom looks outward at the stories. Before the Fence turns inward at the person required to tell them.

It's a Sin · HBO Max

STRUCTURAL & COMMERCIAL PARALLEL

A community living through a crisis, simultaneously political and personal. Demonstrated premium platform appetite for exactly this kind of intimate, historically anchored LGBTQ+ storytelling.

The Assassination of Gianni Versace · FX

STRUCTURAL: KNOWN DESTINATION

Both series are anchored by a tragedy the audience knows is coming. Foreknowledge shifts tension from surprise to inevitability. The fence is not a twist. It is a horizon.

The pressure to remain silent about identity did not disappear. It evolved. For viewers too young to remember the Shepard era, the series reveals how fear shaped everyday American life.

● **A Mirror, Not Nostalgia**

The series revisits the late 1990s not as a safer time but as a precise parallel to now, when the same battles have returned with new names.

● **The Shepard Legacy Continues**

Judy and Dennis Shepard continue their advocacy through The Matthew Shepard Foundation. Their son's story is not closed. It is ongoing.

● **The Story Has Never Been Told This Way**

Through the eyes of a closeted gay journalist required to report on a crime against himself. The professional and the personal become the same unbearable story.

BEFORE THE FENCE

Every generation faces its own fence.

The courage comes in deciding whether to live behind it or step beyond it.

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FORMAT	Limited Drama Series
EPISODES	7 Episodes
PERIOD	1995 – 2000
TARGET	FX / HBO / Paramount+

Inspired by Actual Events