

THE POLITICAL SCENE

By Bill Russell - *Lamoni Chronicle* 3/11/10

I had an eerie feeling last Friday when at a few minutes before 7:00 p.m., after darkness had descended upon Lamoni, a dark van with tinted windows pulled up to “smokers’ corner” across the street from the McDowell Commons. Five adults and a little boy about seven got out. They proceeded to picket Graceland with the most hateful signs imaginable. They were protesting the presentation on campus of the play, “The Laramie Project.”



“The Family,” as I will call them, has every right to protest as they do, and they do it frequently. That is their life. And believe it or not, they are a “church,” consisting mostly of members of the same family.

Our First Amendment’s guarantees of freedom of speech, press, religion, and assembly are written in absolutistic language: “Congress shall make no law....” restricting these rights. However, the Supreme Court has allowed some restrictions on freedom of expression. There is a security exception: if the expression endangers national security or may cause a riot, the government has the right to restrict the expression. You have no right to utter “obscenity,” but the court has had a difficult time defining what that means. Justice Potter Stewart once made the memorable statement: “I can’t define it but I know it when I see it.” You also have no right to defame the character of another person. Here the courts

have to balance your right to expression with the other person’s right to be free from being the victim of malicious libel or slander.

The Family has a long history of picketing with their hateful anti-gay signs. There were about 100 Graceland students standing across the street from smokers’ corner when the Family got out and assumed their positions on the sidewalk.

While they have the right to express their hateful ideas, Graceland, as a private university has the right to prevent them from coming on campus. Arrangements were made with Lamoni Police Chief Dale Killpack for the Family to picket at smokers’ corner and counter demonstrators would be across the street. Barricades were set up on both sides of the street.

These five adult members of the Family may have been surprised that there were about 100 Graceland students waiting for their arrival. They thrive on confrontation, so they might have been disappointed that the students remained silent the whole time.

In contrast to the hate-filled signs of the Family, students very prominently displayed a large sign, “God loves everyone” and a smaller one, “God is love.”



Students who were not aware of the Family’s past activities were shocked at the signs they brought. “God hates fags” and some version of “Matt is burning in hell” have been regulars at their demonstrations ever since the tragic murder of Matthew Shepard in

Laramie, Wyoming in 1998. In what has to rank as one of the most disgusting things I have ever heard of, the Family showed up at Matthew Shepard's funeral with these two signs, and others.

Other signs last Friday included, "Hell is real, ask Matt," "Matt is 10 years in hell," "Fags are beasts," "Mourn for your souls," "God hates Jews," "God hates Obama," and "You will eat your babies." Some people blame the mother when a son turns out to be gay, so in a way the worst sign of all was, "Judy sent Matt to hell." Judy Shepard has been a very outspoken advocate of tolerance since Matt's death. I had the pleasure of meeting her and hearing her speak in Des Moines last year.

Near the end of their one hour visit they sang some songs. Rewriting "God bless America" they sang, "God hates America." Rewriting "We are the world," they sang, "God hates the world, and all its people."

"I was expecting them to be hurling offensive profanities at us," said Paige Webberly, a student from Washington. "But they just stood there, holding their signs and silently preaching their message of hate. Nonetheless, you could feel the tension in the air, and although the protest was silent, it was still an intense situation."

Sally Norton, from England, said, "I recognize the worth of all persons and I wanted to stand up for those who I feel are unfairly judged. I witnesses students, faculty and friends gathering to show unconditional love for each other."

"I was really proud of the Graceland community for all the support they showed for our counter protest," said Christy Pratt of Lamoni, chairperson of the Gay Straight Alliance at Graceland.

Jon Hetherington, another Washington student, said, "One of the saddest things was to see that seven-year old boy with the sign, 'God hates fags.'" One young mother, seeing the little boy, said, "This breaks my heart. I would like to take him home with me."

As they started to leave, Sheriff Bert Muir stopped them and told them the sheriff's department would escort them out of the county. So with patrol cars in front and behind them, the Family was escorted from the State of Iowa.

The play was wonderful. Directed by Melissa C. Thompson, the nine student actors each played several characters extremely well: Annie Merab Arnold, Valeria Avina, Sam Clegg, David Cook, Abby Hernandez, Darrell James Johnston, Andrew Nilsen, Kari Ann Nilsen, and Tammy Sawyer. The play is based on research done by Moises Kaufman and the members of the Tectonic Theater Project. It deals with how a university town had to come to terms with the fact that such a heinous crime had occurred in their community. They had to ask themselves whether the environment in Laramie was partly to blame.

A few years ago in Michigan, the Ku Klux Klan had a Sunday afternoon rally on the steps of the state capital. When they left, members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) brought buckets and mops and scrubbed the steps where the Klansmen had been standing.

Last Friday's demonstration was similar to the typical Ku Klux Klan rally. There are usually more police than Klansmen, and more counter demonstrators than police. Last Friday in Lamoni there were five adult demonstrators (I refuse to count that poor little boy in the group), about eight or ten law enforcement officers, and approximately one hundred counter demonstrators.

Our Graceland students stood tall last Friday night. Too bad they didn't have buckets and mops to scrub the sidewalk when the Family left town.

*Pictures courtesy of Brooke Sutherland,
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