Dancing On Your Grave

Donna Minkowitz Gets Close To Fred Phelps, AIDS Funeral Picketer

December 1, 1994 By Donna Minkowitz

It's the march on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights in April 1993 and my friend Ed and I are marching joyfully down Pennsylvania Avenue. From half a block away, we see the huge block-lettered signs facing the gay marchers and get our voices in gear to shout "Shame!" It's not too disturbing a prospect—something to get our blood going for the long march to the rally site. But these signs, when we get close enough to read them, hit us like a punch in the stomach. Instead of the usual bland injunctions to "Find Jesus," we read: "Fags Are Worthy of Death…Filthy AIDS Spreaders…God Hates Fags."

It was the first I'd seen of the Reverend Fred Phelps and his tireless Westboro Baptist Church (WBC), whose central mission is to cause pain to people with AIDS, gays and lesbians, and anyone who sticks up for them. "I love to use words that send them off the edge emotionally. There's nothing better than that," Phelps tells me when I meet him a year later on his home turf in Topeka, Kansas. To protect myself from this man, who's been accused of repeated acts of violence, I'm wearing a wig, a long flowered dress and a stupid grin: Anything that will make me seem like someone on his side, not someone who deserves to be tormented.

When composer Kevin Oldham died of AIDS in 1993, Phelps and his flock picketed the funeral site in Kansas City, after sending the bereaved parents a letter calling Oldham a "filthy dead sodomite." When New York State AIDS Institute Director Nicholas Rango died of the disease last fall, Phelps mailed Rango's mother a flyer calling him a "famous fag" and "filthy piece of human garbage: who "checked into hell November 10, after being greeted there by [deceased *New York Times* reporter] Jeff Schmalz." Harassing bereaved families is Phelps's specialty. And the deceased doesn't' have to be as famous as Oldham, Rango or author Randy Shilts (the subject of another Phelps funeral picket) for the Westboro Baptist Church to descent on the family like vultures.

"When Kenny died, they came to the funeral with a sign that said 'Fags=Death' with a big smiley face," recalls Sue Mee, whose brother Kenneth Scott, a Topeka graduate student, died of AIDS in 1992. To this day, Mee and her family receive harassing phone calls from persons they believe to be members of Phelps' church. "An old lady or a child will call and say, 'Is this the house of fags?' or 'Is this the house where fags live?'" Phelps daughter Liz, who went to high school with Scott's brother Randy, denies that phone harassment is a family technique. "That's just one more rabble-rousing fag lie," she says. But on the street, Phelps' grandchildren have greeted Mee and her

sister Deena Roland as “lesbian baby killers” and “Suzie Sodomite,” then written down their license plate numbers. (Like many whom WBC publicly assails as gay, Mee and Roland are actually heterosexual.) Late at night, male Phelps relatives have followed the sisters home. In Mee’s view, the thing that really brought Phelps’ ire down on the family was their decision to honor Scott’s wishes by stating openly in his obituary that he had died of AIDS.

Phelps and his 50 church members, comprised mostly of his adult children and grandchildren, have admitted doing many of the nasty, unscrupulous and plain sadistic things they are accused of. When city councilwoman Beth Mechler declined to support Phelps’ campaign against gay male cruising in Topeka’s Gage Park, he somehow obtained a copy of her lab report from a local blood bank stating that her blood was refused for donation. Then he published the information in three widely distributed faxes suggesting she had AIDS.

“Someone left her medical records in my mailbox,” Phelps claims, “And they said she had hepatitis B. Well that’s something *like* AIDS! So I put out a flyer saying, ‘Does she have AIDS?’ I used a question mark.” The 1992 flyer screamed that Mechler’s blood was “tainted with a social disease (in the genre of AIDS or HIV).” Another fax showed a computer-enhanced drawing of Mechler with KS lesions, and announced that “rumor has it [she’s] tested positive for the HIV virus.”

Mechler says she is not HIV positive but does, in fact, carry the hepatitis virus. She says the rumor campaign was devastating. “You just didn’t want to be me when that was going on, because everybody thought I had AIDS,” she says candidly. In Topeka, Phelps’ faxes go to every government office and media outlet as well as to the workplaces of his targets and the homes of many private citizens. “Everyone in my office saw the faxes before I did and my seven-year-old stepdaughter heard about it in school,” says Mechler, a Republican whom Phelps once supported and canvassed for.

Another victim of a WBC dirty tricks campaign is the Shawnee County District Attorney, Joan Hamilton, who was elected on a promise to prosecute the numerous criminal complaints that have been filed against Phelps and his followers—something the previous district attorney had largely declined to do. In revenge, Phelps got hold of a private computer e-mail letter Hamilton had sent her husband acknowledging that she’d had a one-night stand and published the contents in a fax. Over a year later, he continues to harass the district attorney. Phelps published a humorous Christmas card she’d given her husband showing a woman’s bare buttocks, which was obtained from the Hamiltons’ trash. Several times a day, he demonstrates with huge signs that refer to fictitious sexual liaisons between the D.A. and specific men and women. He repeatedly phones Hamilton and her family to tell them she’s a “switch-hitting Jezebellian whore.” By means of this harassment, Phelps has managed to hold up dozens of criminal and civil cases that are pending against him. In court papers, Phelps argues that Hamilton is *personally* angry with Phelps and therefore incapable of evaluating the cases impartially.

It’s a tactic that reminds me of one of my favorite political groups—ACT UP/New York—even if few members of ACT UP are as cruel as Fred Phelps. “Desperate times require desperate measure,” Phelps tells his congregation at the Sunday service I attend. The same words were used on the

poster for a 1993 ACT UP action. Phelps reads from a Biblical passage in which Jonah warns that God "will sacrifice your bones," then wonders aloud "what they would think if we ran out to the graves [of people with AIDS], dug 'em up, burnt their bones and scattered the ashes!" Maybe, Phelps booms, "some of their relatives have got religion, and will send us their ashes, and we'll have a ceremony with them!"

The hypothetical action he's proposing differs only in *meaning* —not in form—from some of ACT UP's. "We are not in the negotiating business," the preacher cries, sounding like the late ACT UP/New York member Bob Rafsky. "We are not here to parley!" It's not surprising that the four-hour Sunday service feels a little like a longish ACT UP meeting. A penchant for similar tactics—fax and phone zaps and, occasionally, personal harassment of some enemies (like the "Surrender Dorothy" campaign against former New York City Health Commissioner Stephen Joseph) isn't all that Phelps and some ACT UP members have in common. They also share a deep reservoir of rage.

When I meet Phelps, in a way he feels like a brother—holding five to 10 demonstrations a day, fighting dirty, hurting his enemies in any way he can. All of the Biblical quotations in his faxes come from the most punitive, most retaliatory passages in the Bible. One says: "Then said the king to the servants, bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Another goes: "To me belongeth vengeance and recompense; their foot shall slide in due time; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste." One of the reason that Phelps and his clan picket funerals is so they can feel an ultimate sense of victory, standing over the body of an attacker who's been reduced to carrion.

I've often fantasized in a similar vein about my own oppressors.

Rage is the driving force behind many ACT UP actions and is one of my major driving forces, even if I'm hiding it at this moment behind a treacly blouse with a bow and pantyhose that are cutting off the blood supply to my legs. Phelps, 66, turns out to be a pleasant and trim six footer in a running jacket, dyed blond hair and tight purple bicycle shorts. When I meet him, he is holding a big sign that says "Fag God=Rectum" in front of a conservative Lutheran church that Phelps pickets once a week. Like ACT UP—especially in that group's earlier days—he's sometimes cavalier about picking his targets. (Other entities Phelps has set out to punish include the Topeka Police Department, conservative pundit Mary Matalin and Rev. Pat Robertson, whom Phelps calls "a femmy fag demon Nazi.")

The first thing Fred says to me about people with HIV is, "In five years, there'll be two million of these monkeys, now that they're living longer and longer. That's going to bankrupt this country." I hope that my immediate desire to strangle him won't later turn into a substitute barrage against my lover or my friends—for me, easier victims at the moment. I don't see rage as evil but I think that unexamined, misdirected rage can be. Sometimes I've wondered whether certain activists—myself included—have engaged in a particular action mainly for the emotional catharsis of confronting an enemy, not to advance a particular political goal. I've observed that anger about AIDS isn't' the only anger poured into AIDS demonstrations.

The most egregious violence Phelps has been accused of is also the ultimate example of unexamined, misdirected rage: The severe physical abuse of his 13 children, the backbone of his congregation and his activist corps. The children are all adults now and apparently non longer subject to his beatings, but four have cut all ties with their family.

The other nine live in houses that surround the ancestral Phelps home (which doubles as the church) and spend most of their free time holding their father's signs and demonstrating against the enemies he has targeted. All of his children have become lawyers—at their father's insistence—and spend considerable time suing his political adversaries. Five of the loyal Phelps children recently told the *Topeka Capital-Journal* that their father routinely hit them with belts and hairbrushes when they were children—but they believe this was "appropriate discipline." The children who've left the fold have gotten more specific. Both Mark and Nate Phelps, now businessmen in California, say that childhood in the Phelps house was a nightmare of beatings with a mattock handle (something like the handle of a hoe) and a leather razor strap specially ordered from a leather shop. They remember several children being put on starvation diets as a form of punishment and a game that involved Phelps holding a child in the air and repeatedly smashing his knee into the child's groin while laughing.

Asked about these allegations, Phelps basically owns up to them: "Those boys saying I beat 'em when they were little are telling the absolute truth! You know, that word 'nurture' means corporal punishment. He expounds on this theme for a while. "Foolishness lives in the heart of the child and only the rod of correction will drive it from him. He who spares the rod doesn't love his child!" Phelps' only quibble with his sons' story is the following: "When they say I'd take a big tree limb or something and beat 'em for four hours, that's not true." His wife, Marge, keeps here eyes on the floor the entire time he is talking about beating the kids. Mark and Nate say he beat Marge as well, though Phelps denies this. The preacher abruptly interrupts his lecture on corporal punishment to gripe that "Nate is the only one who dropped out of high school."

All around Phelps' home are tokens of his own childhood. Prominently displayed in the church's anteroom, which doubles as a political meeting space and fax designing workspace, are an American Legion School Award addressed to "Fred W. Phelps of Meridian Public," and Phelps' Eagle Scout sash, covered with medals. In all of the room I am invited to enter—every one but the two bedrooms—I see no mementos of any of his children and certainly none of his wife. Instead there are Fred's athletic trophies from high school, his college diploma, medals from the Senior Olympics, a framed copy of the *Topeka Capital-Journal* marking his first sermon in Topeka back in 1954. Fred is clearly the child Fred wishes to honor—and that child's anger drives all the Westboro Baptist Church's political work.

Some observers have speculated that Fred may be a survivor of child sexual abuse or another form of severe child abuse. From books I've read, it seem reasonable to me that much of his behavior could stem from childhood trauma. In addition to his vast rage, Fred is noticeably obsessed with sexual combinations, details, words and desires that he casts as "filthy" or "shameful." Like his faxes, his conversations overflow with sexual references, especially intimations of anal sex. One typical Phelps fax asks, "What's wrong, faggots? Balls lost to hiney-

poking?" and refers to "the disease-breeding, feces-packing, semen swallowing, fisting, golden-showering, gerbil-mongering fags and dykes" who Fred believe control the newsroom at the *Topeka Capital-Journal*.

Although I want to test my hypothesis, I can't ask Fred directly whether he's been abused because that would blow my know-nothing cover. So instead I talk to him about child molestation: Has he ever taken action against a homosexual who molested children?

For the only time during my six days with him, Fred chokes up. "Yeah, a fag priest from Kansas City, Kansas, he messed with a little kid up there and the kid committed suicide," he says with emotion. Did he ever meet a homosexual child molester? He answers by addressing an imaginary attacker: "I'm warning you, you leave these little kids alone!" Fred has tears in his eyes now and he speaks haltingly. "We picketed that fag priest. We picketed all those guys. They wouldn't listen to me, when we showed them Gage Park with condoms piled up and the bloody men's underwear!"

In an earlier conversation about AIDS education, Phelps had told me: "When I was little, like 13, if they'd come to me and talked about safe sex, I would have said, I don't want any sex at all! Why are you pushing these fags on me?"

Fred later denies that he was ever abused as a child, sexually or otherwise. "If anything, I was indulged."

It was strange to have even one moment of empathy for the man who sent a fax to the parents and friends of Lydia Moore, a lesbian doctor recently killed in a car crash, calling her "an evil, murderous dyke" who "knows better" now that she's "screaming" in "hell." According to a local gay paper, Moore was the physician in Kansas City to treat people with AIDS. At a Phelps demo in Kansas City, a passerby asks Sarah, Fred's 13-year-old grandchild, who Lydia is. Sarah answers merrily, "Lydia Moore, she was a 38-year-old dyke, coming back from vacation with her dyke lover, and a semi crashed into their car and killed them!"

Flashing a cold grin from behind her mirrored sunglasses, Sarah terrifies me—she's the only member of the family who is possibly as psychotic as her grandfather. But it's not hard for me to empathize with other members of the Phelps family.

Protesting makes them happy, as the Phelps' clan illustrated at last summer's Stonewall 25 celebration of gay and lesbian rights in New York City. That's certainly an emotion I've shared. The other under-30s chime in. "Some German guy came up to us and asked, 'What's a gerbil?'" James Hockenbarger recounts as everyone laughs. Abigail sounds remarkably like an ACT UP organizer when se explains, "When you're standing out there for that long, you've got to think of something to keep yourselves entertained." So when the Stonewall 25 marchers harangued them with cries of "Shame!" Abigail and the others chanted back: "Bo-ring! Bo-ring!" with a theatrical gesture that was pure ACT UP. These are the campiest homophobes I have ever met.

Libby, 11, says, “I don’t understand what could be more fun than this!”

In his unpublished book *Addicted to Hate*, former *Topeka Capital-Journal* writer Jon Bell suggests that the family finds protesting so much fun because they have transformed their anger at Fred into a general rage at any target he puts in front of them. I can understand why Margie Phelps, one of Fred’s daughters, says that the church’s picketing has helped “a lot of us tot work through emotional problems.”

“All they want a vaccine or a cure for is so they can be protected in their promiscuity,” Fred says into my tape recorder, delighted to have found a reporter who just wants days and days of his sound bites. Though he’s found a convenient target in people with HIV, his actual view about AIDS are contradictory. “Blood transfusions—that’s a legitimate suffering class of innocent victim,” he opines. “Ryan White, it wasn’t right that he got AIDS.” Straight who get infected through sex are another story: “They’re guilty by definition.” The same, he says, goes for IV drug users. But would he picket their funerals? “We generally only do it if the media makes a hero out of them.”

He see HIV poster woman Mary Fisher as an enemy: “We’ll be picketing her sorry butt, ’cause she’s so dumb. She’s going around getting bleeding hearts to contribute to those AIDS projects.” But while he doesn’t want AIDS projects to be funded, Phelps actually says that the government ought to pay for the treatment of people with IADS. “They should get treatment. They just shouldn’t be comforted while they’re getting treatment.”

The more I talk to him, the clearer it gets that Phelps really doesn’t care about the issue one way or the other. Maybe that’s why he puts energy into picketing Pat Robertson, calls Jerry Falwell “a mealy-mouthed money-grubber,” fax-zapped Queen Elizabeth and once fired a political lawsuit against Ronald Reagan. Perhaps it explains why, in addition to funerals of people with AIDS, he picketed services for Bill Clinton’s mother, Virginia Kelly, someone who had no known opinion about HIV or homosexuality. AIDS, loaded with cultural metaphors of guilt and filth, is simply a convenient peg for Phelps to hang his hate on.

But despite Fred’s erratic aim, he’s still had a major effect on the lives of AIDS-bereaved families and people living with HIV generally. Simply knowing Fred exists and does what he does causes great pain. “I know it cause me emotional harm every time I have to walk past one of his signs,” says Topeka carpenter Michael stark, who was diagnosed with AIDS in 1988. “Can you imagine the emotional harm he’s done to a 10 or 11 year old who realizes he’s growing up gay and sees this garbage?”

Next to Phelps, people like Pat Robertson and Gary Bauer look like allies—and even George Bush looks like a friend to people with HIV. “He makes them look moderate by comparison, and that’s dangerous,” says Jerry Sloan, who monitors the religious right for Planned Parenthood. “When Phelps came to picket Randy Shilts’ funeral, several San Francisco anti-gay right-wingers issued statements putting Phelps down. We countered with, ‘Gee, just what part of his message do you disagree with?’” The Phelps family has had considerably more influence with mainstream elected officials than might be expected. Phelps’ son Fred Jr., was Al Gore’s northeast Kansas campaign

manager in the 1988 Presidential election. Many Topeka city council members have been elected with Phelps' support. Most of the nine loyal Phelps offspring work as lawyers for the local government. Though their numbers are small and their message is wacky, their influence cannot be denied.

In the end, activism will always have an effect for good or ill, beyond its emotional impact on the individual activist. ACT UP, for example, has had the effect of saving many people's lives, even if the reason Activist X yells at the cops during a particular demonstration has more to do with private pain than with government indifference to HIV. We will never have a political movement that is not saturated with emotional motivations: "Feelings are always about more than one thing," wrote poet Adrienne Rich, and it is inevitable that one experience of oppression will recall others.

What is crucial is to recognize the baggage each of us brings to the political fight. Fred Phelps knows how liberating it can be to feel like one is fighting back—and in that way, Fred Phelps is all of us. What Fred Phelps blatantly lacks is an understanding of how to change society in a way that might actually remove what hurts him. And if someone had taught him how to let his rage out on the appropriate target, he wouldn't have to let it out on us.

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