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Church faithful applaud film

Documentary on anti-gay pickets took KU student year to compile

By James Carlson
The Capital-Journal

About 30 members of Westboro Baptist Church munched on buttered popcorn and warm chocolate chip cookies Sunday afternoon as they screened a new documentary on the followers of Fred Phelps.

Throughout the film, viewers, most of whom wore shirts that read "GodHatesFags.com," cheered Phelps's words and yelled at the TV during interviews with those who opposed the church's anti-homosexual message. Phelps didn't attend the screening.

The church has gained international attention for its members' anti-gay pickets. More recently, the church has made headlines for picketing at soldiers' funerals.

With lights dimmed, the congregation sat on couches in spokeswoman Shirley Phelps-Roper's living room, laughing and chatting like any other family gathered for movie night. As the opening credits rolled, the hymn "Sound the Battle Cry" played loud, and Phelps-Roper belted out the lyrics.

"Strong to meet the foe, marching on we go! While our cause we know, must prevail!" she sang from the back of the room.

Topeka lawyer Pedro Irigonegaray, a supporter of gay rights, then came on screen, and the room filled with laughter.



Ann Williamson/The Capital-Journal

Members of the Westboro Baptist Church watch Ryan Jones' film "Fall from Grace" at Shirley Phelps-Roper's home Sunday afternoon. Jones, a senior film student at The University of Kansas, filmed segments with members of the church over the past year.

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"Anyone got any eggs?" Phelps-Roper asked.

The documentary began by laying out the beginning of the church's crusade against homosexuality, showing photos of the first pickets at Gage Park. The filmmaker, film student Ryan Jones, a senior at The University of Kansas, spent a year gathering footage. He said he wasn't too concerned about reaction from church members.

"I tried my best to give an objective look at the church," he said.

He stood in the corner Sunday and watched the family's first reactions.

When views the church didn't agree with were shown, church

members preached their counter-arguments to the screen.

When Irigonegaray said, "Not to oppose bigotry is to support it," Phelps-Roper retorted, "Not to oppose sin is to support it."

But laughter was the most common response throughout the film. When footage showed a Westboro member stomping and kicking the American flag, the audience laughed. When a young Phelps child spoke on camera about wanting to kill those who oppose the church's anti-homosexual message, the room erupted -- though he added that punishment is God's responsibility, not his, and a churchmember later said the church didn't condone murder. The biggest laughs came when Topeka Mayor Bill Bunten said, "I don't have any quarrel with their picketing."

"The laughter is so derisive," Jones said. "I did not expect that."

A theology professor interviewed countered the church's stance on homosexuality, and one man in the crowd accused him of intellectual dishonesty.

But Phelps-Roper was the most vocal **FILM SHOWING**

of the group. At various times she called people interviewed in the film "a lying sack of crap," "a liar," and "two losers." The latter she used to describe two of her siblings who left the church.

When: 7 p.m. Wednesday

Where: Woodruff Auditorium in the Kansas Union on the KU campus

Cost: Free

Jones said he was apprehensive at first about giving church members another platform from which to preach.

In the end, he said he hoped his film would educate people more fully about who church members were. He also said he hoped it would stop some people from trying to confront protesters, which he said does little good.

Evidence of the church members' conviction came during a filmed interview with Kelly Franz, the widow of a dead American soldier. Franz described how the couple met and the pain she experienced walking past the Westboro pickets at her husband's funeral.

One of the teenage Phelps girls called the widow a whore.

With tears streaming down her face, Franz said of her husband, "I don't think he had an enemy in the world."

Without missing a beat, numerous viewers responded aloud, "Except God."

Jones said he learned during his year of filming how to close off his emotions.

"Then I interviewed Kelly, and all those walls I had built up came down," he said. "I realized during then I was going to have to deal with all that stuff I had put away."

As the closing music swelled, the room filled with applause.

"Good work Ryan," one person said.

Phelps-Roper had high praise for the film.

"On a production level it was good, the content was good," she said. "Anytime we get the word out there that we are a doomed country -- a doomed generation -- it's a good thing."

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