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PHELPS-A-THON

Protests and counterprotests raise money for gay rights

By ALEXIS HAUKE

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Seventy-five gay rights advocates raised more than \$4,500 in a faceoff with Fred Phelps' Westboro Baptist Church outside the Boston Center for the Arts' Black Box Theatre last Friday.

Phelps' fire-and-brimstoners from Topeka, Kan., were picketing Bad Habit Productions' staging of *The Laramie Project*, which is based on the real-life 1998 homophobia-fueled murder of gay student Matthew Shepard. Phelps and his minions picketed Shepard's funeral, waving "Matt is in Hell" signs at his grieving family.

Bad Habit artistic director Daniel Morris took the protest in stride. "We had a big discussion about what has changed in the past 10 years," he said. "Them being here is definitely validating the relevance of the show."

The six Westboro picketers screamed and carried signs, one sign depicting President-elect Barack Obama as the Antichrist (with flames and horns), another sign—held by a smiling 11-year-old girl—proclaiming "God Hates You." Phelps' website, godhatesfags.com, condemns everything from Italian art to the 2010 World Cup, and claims that God is letting troops die in Iraq as punishment for gay marriage.

Across Tremont Street, activist Chris Mason counterprotested with a "Phelps-a-Thon," raising money for gay rights with pledged donations for every minute the Phelps clan stuck around. By curtain-up on *Laramie*, they had raised \$4,647—\$755 of which came from donations made during the protest, sometimes in the form of \$20 bills shoved into Mason's hand by onlookers.

Despite freezing temperatures, Mason's group stayed upbeat. "Give a big cheer for Fred Phelps!" they yelled, as the number of dollars, displayed on a colorful poster, went up. Drowning out the other side of the street, they chanted, "You're crazy, you're funny. You're raising us money!" and held up their own homemade signs like, "I can has sanity plz?" and "Hate is easy. Love takes courage." One man danced around the Kansaniacs dressed only in cutoff jeans and a jaunty sailor's cap.

Rev. Michael Cooper, pastor of Metropolitan Community Church, an LGBTcommunity, attended the counterprotest to show that Westboro "is not the voice of the Christian church."

"In terms of my faith and my beliefs, it's sad to see someone with that much hate so intent on spreading it," Cooper said. "Even though [Fred Phelps] looks like an idiot and people laugh at him, there's still some fear and memory deep down. We should counter that and say, 'There are other options.'"

Fred Phelps' daughter, Shirley Phelps-Roper, helped organize the Boston protest. "When you make sin a civil right? Yeah, God's against that," she said, laughing and nodding. She blamed the souring economy on the "doomed Americans" as well. "That's why they're losing their jobs," she said. "The doomed Americans weren't willing to just go to hell. They wanted to take us with them. They've done every manner of evil thing, and now God is repaying them."

For 45 minutes, South End residents watched from their stoops as policemen directed traffic. One passing driver asked if Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps was here. Finally, the Phelps crowd piled into a minivan as Mason's crowd cheered, "Hooray! Hooray! We chased the Phelps away!"

The Boston excursion cost Westboro around \$2,000, half the amount that Mason will use to fund his Driving Equality project, a 100-day road trip next summer, during which he'll interview people about gay rights all across the lower 48 states.

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