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FEATURE STORY

Avenging Angel

Romaine Patterson, of Sirius Satellite's 'OutQ,' on the recent Phelps decision, motherhood and her "two" Matthews

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Fred Phelps will never go away.

That's the harsh reality Romaine Patterson has come to realize about Phelps, leader of the infamously homophobic Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kan., whose oversized, neon-colored signs declaring, "God Hates Fags" and "Fags Die, God Laughs," are often used by the reverend and his few followers while protesting the funerals of gays -- and in recent years, war veterans.

"If it's not him, it will be another group," Patterson laments.

Patterson, co-host of the *Derek & Romaine* show on Sirius Satellite Radio's gay channel, OutQ, first crossed paths with the Phelps clan -- the majority of his fellow protesters seem to be his family -- in Laramie, Wyo., at the 1998 funeral of her close friend Matthew Shepard. Beaten and left to die, the homophobic murder of Shepard put a nationally recognized face on anti-gay hate crime.

Patterson garnered national attention for organizing a peaceful counter-protest against Phelps and his minions during the trial of Shepard's killers. Appearing as angels, Patterson and her allies wore large white wings blocking Phelps' "Matt Burns In Hell" signs from view. That effort launched Angel Action in 1999, an international initiative that promotes peaceful counter protests against hate-driven demonstrations.

The recent news that a federal jury on Oct. 31 awarded Albert Snyder -- whose son, Lance Cpl. Matthew Snyder, was killed in Iraq -- nearly \$11 million in his suit against the Westboro Baptist Church and Phelps, who protested the soldier's Maryland funeral in 2006, did not have Patterson jumping for joy. Her concern is in part for the impact such a decision might have on freedom of speech for everyone in this country.

"When it comes to Fred Phelps, it's really tough for me," she explains. "I wish he didn't exist and I wish that he was not going around in the world protesting at the funerals of people who died of AIDS, or gay people, or now these American soldiers who have fallen in Iraq. But he has every right to do it because that is one of those great privileges we are provided in this country."

Patterson, a native of Wyoming who briefly lived in Washington, D.C., in 2000 while working for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), and who now lives in New Jersey with her partner, Iris Hernandez, and their 4-month-old daughter, shares her views on the Phelps lawsuit and what she's been up to since her 1998 rise to notoriety as the girl with the angel wings.



Romaine Patterson of Sirius' OutQ

METRO WEEKLY: *When were you introduced to Fred Phelps and his followers?*

ROMAINE PATTERSON: The first time I actually heard about Fred Phelps was right before the memorial for my good friend, Matthew Shepard. Phelps showed up at his memorial service to protest and show his dislike for gays and his belief that "God hates gays." That was the first time I saw him.

MW: *Do you remember what was going through your mind during that encounter?*

PATTERSON: To be real honest, there was a lot going on that day. We had just lost Matthew a couple days prior, and at that point in time there was

such a media circus happening around Matthew's case. Hundreds and hundreds of people had showed up in Casper [Wyo.] to go to the memorial service, so it was really kind of a distressing day anyway.

It was already an overwhelming experience. To throw Fred Phelps on top of it just made it that much more so. My first reaction to him was just disgust, complete and utter disgust. I think it's really hard for people to fathom how someone can hate to that level that they are willing to go to something like a memorial service where people and family and friends are grieving and be that blatantly disrespectful and disgusting.

At the same time, because it was such a day of mourning, I didn't really allow it to be my full focus of the day. I had other things that were far more important than Phelps. I did everything in my power not to look at him because I thought he was just a hateful, horrible human being.

MW: *You later decided to do something about him.*

PATTERSON: Yes. The Angel Action idea came about six months later when we were all trying to get ourselves mentally ready for the trial of Russell Henderson, who was one of the two men accused of killing Matthew. I was on the phone with a good friend of mine named Jim Osborn, who at the time was the president of the gay and lesbian group at the University of Wyoming, discussing the trial. We had heard that Phelps had planned to come to the courthouse. We kind of came up with this idea that someone should do something about it because, obviously, we live in a country where freedom of speech and the freedom to protest is one of our most cherished rights. It wasn't like we could stop him from protesting. But even though they have the right to protest, what I didn't understand is why other people never felt the need to stand up side-by-side and let people see something more positive, so that when they looked at the two things side by side, it was very clear who was good and who was evil.

We talked about [Phelps'] message that God hates. I was raised Catholic. I was taught to believe that God is not about hate, God is about love, respect and compassion. So in the course of that we came up with the idea of using an image from the Bible to demonstrate God's love. In the Bible angels are the bearers of messages, whenever God wanted man to know something. We decided that the angels would be the ones to bear this message.

It ended up being very powerful that a group of people who said nothing at all became such a powerful demonstration and presence in Laramie that day, showing very clearly the difference between a hateful group and a group of people who are compassionate and loving and respectful. The nation at that time needed to see an image like that. From a technical point it worked really well with the large wings we used to surround [Phelps'] group, to cover up all of his hateful signs.

MW: *Nearly a decade later, Phelps made national headlines Oct. 31 when a federal jury in Maryland awarded nearly \$11 million to the father of veteran killed in Iraq, whose March funeral was protested by the Phelps group.*

PATTERSON: I think a lot of people will be surprised by my stance on it. I really loathe and despise Fred Phelps. I think he is the most despicable type of human being in the world. But we are a country founded on a certain set of rights and principles, and that's something I cherish. I cherish that as an American because this is the country we live in and I really respect that. But I also cherish it because I look at my new career where I'm on a radio show that is completely censorship-free.

With this lawsuit, it really becomes kind of touchy for me. I know that Congress has passed a bill that Fred Phelps can't protest at soldiers' funerals, and I think that we're really walking on some thin ice with that. When you start trying to make up rules and laws that go directly against one of the rights we have in the Constitution, I really start to worry because that can cut both ways. Yes, it could be used to [shut] down someone like Fred Phelps, but it could also be used to shut somebody else within our own community, should someone get to being too public or saying something too loudly that other groups don't like.

While I wish that there was a way to shut these individual groups down, I really think that ultimately we can't afford to from a Constitutional point of view.

MW: *How closely do you follow Phelps-related news?*

PATTERSON: I've always kept tabs on Fred over the years because, quite frankly, I find him a really fascinating person. I find his daughter, Shirley, really fascinating because she's the one who will take the helm once Fred dies. I find the family fascinating in some sense because they're crazy.

In terms of this protesting the soldiers who have fallen in Iraq, ultimately what that comes down to is that he loves media attention. The more media he gets, the more outlandish he's going to act in order to continue achieving that media. It's just one more opportunity to send his message out. If the media had completely ignored him, and no longer did interviews and no longer focused on him, truth be told, he probably would protest a lot less and would probably be less offensive than he is now. But because he gets so much attention, it just fuels this fire that is his mission, telling the world that God hates everybody pretty much. I don't think God likes him.

MW: *In regards to the Respect for America's Fallen Heroes Act, passed in 2006, do you think the Phelps protests only received attention from politicians once they targeted veterans?*

PATTERSON: I don't think anything like this would have been passed if he had just stuck to gay people and people who died of AIDS, and things like that. When he started blatantly going after veterans, it wasn't a gay issue anymore. It became more of a people issue, a society issue.

Straight people had never had to endure what it was like to be a gay person. It's eye-opening for the straight people at these memorial services where there's this guy who hates gay people, and they're like, "Why is he even here? We're not even gay." All of the sudden they're being targeted in the



Romaine Patterson

same way that gay people have been for years. It's very disconcerting for them. All of a sudden they're waking up and paying attention to this problem we've had for years.

Fred got a lot of attention when he protested the funeral of Matthew, but that's because Matthew was a huge, national media story. Prior to that, when Fred Phelps was protesting in the '80s at funerals for men who had died of AIDS, he didn't get any attention. He might have gotten a little local attention from people in small towns, but he never had national media exposure.

The first time he got a lot of exposure was with Matthew. That's when he learned, "The more outlandish I am, the more insane I am, the more attention I'm going to get."

MW: *Do you resent that Congress didn't act against Phelps until he turned his protests on presumably straight veterans?*

PATTERSON: I don't think I resent it. If anything, I guess I'm one of those gay people who sees it as a positive thing. I think there are a lot of straight people out there -- and a lot of gay people too -- who disillusion themselves into believing that the world is an entirely better place. Sometimes we forget, when we see *Will & Grace* on TV and we hear about all these positive gay victories, that there are still people out in the world who absolutely loathe and despise us, and wish we were dead. I actually think of Fred [Phelps] not so much as a bad thing, but sometimes he's one of our best allies. He serves as a very good reminder that there is still a lot of work that needs to be done.

MW: *How should people respond to the Phelps protests?*

PATTERSON: The community needs to come together like this big entity and just say, "We're not going to tolerate that." I've seen that happen in a variety of ways. Sometimes they'll have support groups when they know Fred Phelps is going to be protesting. Sometimes they'll do things like I did where they'll create like a wall or barrier between the everyday Joe and this hate monger. Sometimes they'll send out something more entertaining for the media that day to draw attention to. There are a lot of ways to make a good situation out of a bad situation.

The other thing that really needs to happen is that the police really need to be educated on how to most effectively handle these types of situations. I don't think they really realize how much violence and hatred Fred Phelps incites. If you know that Fred Phelps is coming to a community, then take the steps to educate your local law enforcement so that they know what to be prepared for.

MW: *You shared some of the advocacy you have done since Matthew's death in *The Whole World Was Watching: Living in the Light of Matthew Shepard*.*

PATTERSON: That book was kind of a way of closing the chapter in many ways for me. By the time I wrote the book I had been doing the work around Matthew for seven or eight years.

It's funny, I have two Matthews: I have "Matt" that I knew before he died. That was the friend, the person I knew, the person I loved. And then I have this whole other Matthew, who was "Matthew Shepard," the iconic figure that the world knows. I've known Matthew Shepard longer than I knew Matt.

The book was really a time where I could cleanse and heal and work through a lot of stuff. I wanted to be able to give the world something, a glimpse of what it was really like to not only go through that experience, but also to really give light to how one person can kind of hone their voice and utilize the skills that you have to create change.

MW: *Let's talk about your childhood. What is the earliest memory you have of being a lesbian?*

PATTERSON: Oh, God. I had an interesting childhood. I'm the youngest of eight children and I had three older gay brothers, and it came to me when I actually spent a summer in Denver with my older gay brothers. That was the first time I had been exposed to gay people that I knew were gay. I had been taught all these stereotypes about gay people my whole life, and then I actually got to see them and be around them and realized that a lot of the stereotypes are just that: stereotypes. It just kind of clicked. I got this crush on this older lesbian friend of my brother's and that was it. It was like I just knew.

MW: *How old were you?*

PATTERSON: I was 13 [or] 14. I was young. And I came out when I got home.

MW: *How was that received?*

PATTERSON: It actually really wasn't that horrible. I went to a very, very small high school. There were 180 kids in my entire school. I came out and, obviously, I went through the typical teenage shit where my peers were kind of assholes for the first two years. I had a lot of trouble.

But I've always been the kind of person who just pushes through those kinds of challenges and finds the best in every situation. I educated them and they educated me and we all kind of grew to understand a little more about being gay, in a weird little way.

MW: *Did having three older gay brothers make your coming-out easier?*

PATTERSON: It was easier because I knew [my parents] could handle it. But it was also harder because I'm like, "Oh, God, one more. They're going to kill me." The fact that [my brothers] were there and they supported me, that made a big difference.

MW: *You lost your oldest gay brother to AIDS in 1997. How did that change your life?*

PATTERSON: I was 19 at the time. It was hard, but in a way I'm the kind of person that takes life's challenges and I look for the best in them, what can I learn from them.

My brother Michael and I, in the final years of his life, became very, very close. That is the time I cherish immensely because I got to know a lot about him and he taught me a lot about life lessons that he had learned as a man who was about to leave his life behind. He shared a lot of very wise things with me.

MW: *Can you share any of those lessons?*

PATTERSON: Just the appreciation for what you do in life. My brother said material possessions are great and in life you will have many different material possessions and you will do a lot. But the one thing he realized as he was passing away was really all that matters in the end is what you leave the world with. How is the world going to remember you? What was the one mark you made on the world? We all have that responsibility to try to make the world a better place, before we leave.

MW: *When did you decide you wanted to have a baby?*

PATTERSON: My partner and I decided last year we wanted to have children together. It was a matter of who was going to carry and so on and so forth. I carried because of convenience in my career.

MW: *How so?*

PATTERSON: My partner had just left the military. She was trying to find a normal civilian career, while I was well established in my career.

MW: *How do you like being a mom?*

PATTERSON: As crazy as it sounds, I feel that now I have a sense of purpose. Even though I've done all that, I really feel like life takes on a whole new meaning when you have a child of your own to raise, and to teach the importance of good things in the world. I think I've done a lot of education elsewhere, but now I get to do it with my child and it's exciting. I'm already learning a lot about myself along the way.

MW: *Such as?*

PATTERSON: That I hate being pregnant. The actual having the baby, I loved. I think it's funny because my on-air personality is really rambunctious and crazy. Off-air, I have come to appreciate the smaller things in life. A little smile in the morning from my daughter is all I need sometimes to get me out of a bad day.

MW: *You named her Romaine, after yourself. Why?*

PATTERSON: It actually had to do with my father. I was the only child my father named. He passed away many years ago. As a way of honoring him, I decided to name my first daughter Romaine.

MW: *What advice would you give gay and lesbian people considering parenthood?*

PATTERSON: I think they should do it. I know that there are certain complications. Just today I had to be up at 6 in the morning to go to the courthouse so that my partner could become a legal parent to my daughter.

MW: *How did it go?*

PATTERSON: It was quick and easy, a lot less stressful than we thought it would be. It's kind of a pain in the ass and I wish we didn't have to go through things like that. But challenges aside, gays and lesbians should definitely have children if they want to. I think gay and lesbian people will teach their children a lot more tolerance and acceptance and respect for other people just because of the trials we've had to endure as a community.

Romaine Patterson can be heard Mondays through Fridays, from 6 to 10 p.m., alongside co-host Derek Hartley, on the "Derek & Romaine" show on Sirius Satellite Radio's gay channel, OutQ. For more information visit www.derekandromaine.com.