

CELEBRATION AGAINST HATE

By Kori Miner

UIC Students and community members gathered in large numbers in early March at the intersection of Morgan and Taylor in reaction to the infamous Westboro Baptist Church picketing the UIC Levine Hillel organization.

Despite the hate-speech of the WBC, the counter-protest seemed to turn into a celebration, creating an unusual sense of campus unity.

While the WBC was expected to be the day's spectacle, the real show came from the counter-protesters. The WBC barely filled up one corner of the intersection, while the counter-protesters, clad in rainbow clothing and wielding sarcastic signs, were spilling off the three remaining corners.

Many students and community members chose to make a different kind of statement by outrageous means. Karoline, a first year UIC student, came to the protest dressed in a revealing devil costume, and chose to further show her distaste for the WBC by hula-hooping and smoking a cigarette.

"How old are you sweetie? Do you want to come and play?" she screamed at a young WBC member.

"I've got so many supporters on the other side, I'm late for my own party! I've been working hard on the Westboro Baptists for months now," she said sarcastically in her Satan costume. "Seriously though, I have nothing to say to people who are so full of hate. I'm hula-hooping because actions are louder than words. Hula-hoop means love."

Many protesters wore outrageous clothing and held sardonic signs reading, “Hail Seitan”, “Who Doesn’t Love Dolphins”, “God Hates When You Don’t Call”, “God Hates Nail Biters”, “This Sign Has Words On It:”, and “I’m Laughing So Hard I Just Turned Gay”. Others were less tongue and cheek, and read, “UIC Welcomes Diversity”, and “God Loves Everyone”.

“Come over here, we have candy!” screamed one anti-WBC protester.

“We love you!” screamed another.

Across the street, a young man dressed in drag jumped up and down and held a sign that read “Snookie Hates Bumpits,” mimicking the popular “Jersey Shore” cast member as a way to trivialize the WBC and their actions.

While the air was full of tension, the general mood of the counter-protesters seemed to be positive. The anti-WBC protesters chose to act out by laughing, passing out candy, and singing songs like, “All You Need Is Love”, “If You’re Happy and You Know It”, as well as the Fresh Prince of Bell-Air theme song. They appeared to be promoting a message of unity and solidarity rather than disdain.

The anti-WBC protest was not limited to UIC students. Zinea Jones, a resident of Tinley Park, came to ask the WBC some questions. She tried to cross the street several times, but was not allowed to speak to or go near the WBC. “My sign says Ezekiel 23-20. That’s a really vulgar bible verse...I want to ask them why fags and Jews rather than missionary work and social justice?” she said.

Agape House, a liberal Protestant Ministry involved with UIC, was visible and seemed to be running the counter protest. Members of Agape passed out signs that read, “Don’t Let Hate

Get U Down” and their youth minister, Kurt Esslinger Lee, led the protest by chanting via a bullhorn and encouraging students to remain positive and peaceful.

“We want to send a message of love to UIC students...A different message from Christ. Homosexuality is not a sin. There’s always hope, even for people who are addicted to hate, even for them. There’s even hope for Satan,” Lee said as the protest was dispersing.

There was a small turnout from community religious leaders. A group of Presbyterian and Lutheran pastors stood together quietly on one of the anti-WBC corners. One Lutheran pastor said, “I’m here because the message Jesus teaches is the opposite of theirs. They’re speaking in the name of my God and it makes me angry.”

Only five members of the WBC were present, in contrast to the roughly one hundred counter-protesters. Hillel chose not to react through protesting outside, but instead held a teach-in on unity and solidarity while the events occurred outside. The WBC were escorted to and from the intersection by Chicago Police, and no counter-protesters were allowed to cross the street and confront them.

On their website, www.godhatesfags.com, the WBC claimed their motive for picketing outside the UIC Hillel was to, “Stop by and say, ‘God hates you.’” The WBC have gained a name for themselves through controversial protests like these, and are known for spreading their messages at funerals of hate-crime victims and Iraq War Veterans.

Their most famous protest was at the funeral of Matthew Shepard, a young gay man who was beaten to death on account of his sexuality. They are an exclusive church made up mostly of Fred Phelps’ (the church’s leader) family, and do not allow new members in unless it is through birth or marriage.

The five WBC members, including a young boy who appeared to be about six years old, held signs that read, “God Hates Israel,” “God Hates Fags,” “God Hates Jews,” “The Jews Killed Jesus,” “Israel is Doomed,” and “Jews Stole the Land.” They began picketing at 11:45am as scheduled, and left about 5 minutes earlier than expected at 12:40.

Meanwhile, the teach-in inside Hillel was in full Swing. Rabbi Anna Rosen of the Levine Hillel center and Rev. Lisa Heymans Paul of Agape House led the talk. Rabbi Rosen opened the teach-in by saying, “I’m glad to see it’s packed with faces smiling. We’re here to celebrate our solidarity, not mourn their hate.”

The teach-in was heavily attended by employees from UIC’s social work department. Nikki, a UIC social worker said that this was because “this is an issue of social justice. It’s a mission of social work to support social justice.”

At the end of the teach-in, the President of Hillel said, “This was not a Hillel issue, this was a community issue. I thought, ‘Let’s turn it into a teachable moment.’ This experience made me very angry. I felt the best way to deal with it was to talk about it.”