

Father of Marine killed in Iraq fights bigoted church group

It was bad enough when two uniformed Marines approached Albert Snyder's York, Pa., home in March of 2006 to deliver the news every military family dreads. Snyder's 20-year-old son was killed while serving his country in Iraq.

Then came word that members of Westboro Baptist Church, a virulently anti-gay and anti-Catholic group based in Topeka, Kan., were making plans to protest the funeral at St. John in Westminster. The group, which demonstrates at military funerals across the country, believes the deaths of U.S. soldiers represent God's punishment for the country's acceptance of homosexuality.

Lance Corporal Matthew Snyder was not gay. He was remembered by friends and loved ones as a dedicated Marine who lost his life when his Humvee overturned in an accident in Al Anbar Province.

The Westboro church members made good on their promise.

While the family sought comfort in the church's funeral rites inside St. John, a circus-like atmosphere prevailed outside as protestors waved signs with messages like "God hates fags," "Matt in Hell" and "Pope in Hell."

A SWAT team and local law enforcement were deployed and a command post was established to help prevent violence. Teachers at nearby St. John Catholic School drew the blinds and put the school in lockdown to prevent children from witnessing the ugly scene.

"It's like you're laying on the ground after being beaten and someone is now kicking you in the face," Snyder remembered in a telephone interview with The Catholic Review.

Four years later, Snyder is on a mission to prevent what happened to his family from happening to anyone else's.

Several months after the funeral, Snyder sued Fred Phelps, a disbarred lawyer and founder of the Westboro Baptist Church. He won an \$11 million judgment that was later reduced to \$5 million. That ruling was overturned in late 2009 when the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the protestors had a right to free speech. The court recently ordered Snyder to pay Phelps' \$16,000 court costs.

Fox News Channel Host Bill O'Reilly announced April 2 on his television show that he was donating that amount to help the Snyder cause. Donations have also been pouring in from across the country.

Snyder said he does not yet know how much has been raised, but he has received nearly 5,000 e-mails and so many messages on his voicemail that the machine is full.

"I think I have a lot of faith in people," Snyder said. "It's so nice right now that for the first time in a long time, this country has something to fight about that's not Democratic, it's not Republican and it's not Tea Party. This is something that everybody shares. It has to do with our soldiers."

Snyder hopes to raise \$130,000 to help with court expenses. Anything raised beyond what he needs in the legal battle against the Westboro Baptist Church will be designated to help veterans of the Iraq war, he said.

Snyder is now taking his fight all the way to the Supreme Court, which is expected to hear his case in October. Asked what he would say to those who insist that the Westboro protestors are exercising their right to free speech, Snyder bristled in a polite, measured and soft-spoken tone.

"I find it insulting," he said. "I find it insulting for all the men and women who are over there fighting wars, for the ones who came back, for our veterans, for the parents who have buried their children, for wives - it's an insult that anyone would hide behind a freedom that so many people in this country have died for."

Snyder said he is grateful for the support of his two daughters, Sarah and Tracie. He also found comfort in the Catholic Church. Father Leo Patalinghug, the former associate pastor of St. John who now serves at Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, offered Matthew Snyder's funeral Mass. He also testified in court in

support of the Snyder family.

"I know the family is still hurt and sad," said Father Patalinghug, who was joined at the funeral by Father John DoBranski, a family friend.

Father Patalinghug remembered the protests at the funeral as "horrible." He coordinated plans with federal officials to bring the family into the church from a back entrance so they wouldn't see the protest. Motorcycle riders with the Patriot Guard were also on hand to block the view.

Snyder acknowledged that the death of his son, the protests at the funeral and the ongoing legal battle have taken a spiritual toll. He does not belong to a parish in York.

"To be honest with you, I've kind of lost a little bit of faith through all this," he said. "I still believe in God and all - don't get me wrong - but this has shaken my faith. I guess it's the one thing that I'm hoping does come back."

To make a donation, visit www.matthewsnyder.org.