

Remembering the real Matthew Snyder



Lance Corporal Matthew Snyder

It's a sad reality that Lance Corporal Matthew Snyder has become linked to the Westboro Baptist Church.

The 20-year-old Marine was killed nearly five years ago when his Humvee overturned in Iraq. During his funeral, Westboro protesters held anti-gay and anti-Catholic signs outside St. John in Westminster - inexplicably insisting that Snyder's death was part of God's vengeance on America for its tolerance of homosexuality.

Snyder was Catholic, but not gay.

Albert Snyder, Matthew Snyder's father, sued the Rev. Fred W. Phelps and members of his Westboro congregation, seeking financial compensation for emotional distress, defamation and other injuries. The case has made it all the way to the Supreme Court and is expected to be decided this year.

Working on a report in last week's Catholic Review about the ?heartwrenching story, I could clearly hear Jane Perkins' passion as Matthew Snyder's maternal aunt told me how difficult it has been that people think of her beloved nephew only in connection with the ugliness of Westboro. They don't know about what a great human being he was, she said.

I invited Perkins to write a reflection on the real Matthew Snyder. She graciously agreed, and I'm honored to share it with you here.



Jane Perkins holds Matthew Snyder after his 1985 baptism. (Courtesy Jane Perkins)

Matt is my Godchild. This is an important relationship, one which I treasure still, and in an instant can be brought to the moment I was asked to be Godmother to Matt.

I love the photo of Matt, with his bald little head, being held in my arms that Christening Day. Living in another state, I was not blessed to share as much time with Matt and his sisters as my siblings were, but we did pretty well, nevertheless. Julie and the children would come to visit overnight and my family would do the same with her. And of course, our family is very close, so there are always parties, graduations and sacraments to celebrate which brought all of the families and cousins together for fun and laughter.

Through the years, my thoughts of Matt run like a picture movie reel. Seeing him for the first time, holding him at the Baptismal font, watching him waddle over to my car when I gave him his first birthday gift - a giraffe clothes tree that each of the nieces and nephews were given on their first birthday. I see him with red painted feet at 18 months, in his kitchen, walking over and over again across white paper, in order for me to be able to make gifts for friends of mine. I see him in his little red shorts and bow tie, twisting and dancing at my wedding (he was 3). I didn't get to see him play his sports when he was little, but my albums have his team photos, swinging a bat, holding a soccer ball. I think of the talents he possessed: black ink sketch drawings, pottery figures, his love for anything baseball amidst arrowheads and precious stones.

I see him in his bathing suit running around at his 8th birthday as we celebrate summer, and Matt. I see him in videos talking to the camera and telling the world all there is to know. I see a little 10-year-old boy driving 3 hours to his baby cousin's Baptism. Matt arrives and presents a hand-created posterboard that had drawings of each of the important items that are a part of the Baptism ceremony—the oil, the white cloth, the candle...each with its meaning special for 1-month old Catie Jane. He's older, and chooses St. Sebastian as his Confirmation saint—Matt was unique in his thoughts and in his actions.



Matthew Snyder (second from left), sits with some cousins awaiting the baptism of

another cousin. (Courtesy Jane Perkins)

He comes into my backdoor and says “Hi, Aunt Jane, I was hoping you’d have barbecue!” I hear him laughing at the bonfire in the back woods. I see him dunking his cousins in the pool. I hear him laughing and playing games with the ‘kids.’”

In our family, Matt is the oldest male cousin, so he is a role model, and he did it well. Although from start to finish, the cousins were ‘13 stairsteps’ little more than a year apart from each other, the oldest were never too old, or too cool or too busy to take time and have FUN with the younger ones. They rolled down hills, stared at clouds, rode wagons, took walks, played games, hiked a football, roasted marshmallows, told ghost stories, trekked through the woods and played football on Thanksgiving. They went fishing, body surfing, told jokes and went to the Baltimore zoo together. I see Matt sitting on the curb, as the July 4th parade marches by. I see Matt living life to the fullest, always smiling. I see Matt laughing so hard, he could be crying.

I hear Matt on the phone telling me he joined the Marines. I say, “Matt, I know you wanted to surprise me, but I can’t say I am surprised. I’m proud of you. When do you leave?” Matt was excited, ready and growing up. He was not 18. That fall, before he left, he came to Lancaster and we met in the parking lot of Dutch Wonderland—we both knew where it was, because when Matt was little, our families would meet there for the day and have fun together. We drove to Good & Plenty for a family style lunch. I told everyone at the table, this is my nephew and he is leaving for boot camp. Matt was always humble, and quietly thanked the strangers for their good wishes. Later I thought, maybe we should have gone somewhere less crowded, that we could have spent more alone time.



John Francis, Matthew Snyder's grandfather, carries his grandson at a Fourth of July parade. Francis is a former Marine from the Korean War. (Courtesy Jane Perkins)

Matt loved everything about his Marine life—there were struggles, of course, but

he was so proud of his accomplishments, such as when he made ‘marksman.’ He was supposed to be deployed much earlier than he did, but playing soccer, he broke his leg in two areas and had to recoup.

When he flew back from 29 Palms, I was in Baltimore, so I wanted to go with my sister to pick him up. Here was this young man, whom I had not seen too often since he returned from boot camp (very lean from the rigors) and now, he is hobbling on crutches and still grabbed his duffel bag and carried it along. He was the Marine we knew he would be—strong, confident and still, humble.

I see Matt carrying the birthday cake, in his fatigues, for my grandmother—his great grandmother who is 98. I see him with his new camera that he is taking with him to Iraq. He is so excited. He is like a kid in a candy store. He has fun acting silly and taking pictures with his cousins. Through the years I always ask him, what do you think you want to do? He has dreams—maybe re-enlisting, maybe going to Australia to be a photographer, maybe something with cars, maybe.....

Matt was a friend to everyone—to this day, we hear stories from strangers to us, but friends to Matt, who tell the story of a good friend who was there when needed the most. And that is how Matt was a child—he was one of the smallest kids, but not afraid to stand up for the underdog. And that is how Matt ended up in the humvee—he went overseas in a different MOS, but there was a need in the security convoy, and Matt knew there was a job to be filled, so he volunteered.

That is LCpl. Matthew Snyder. Not the face next to evil. Not the subject of a lawsuit. Not the Marine with a so-called ‘ruined funeral.’ He is Matt. He is LCpl. Matt Snyder whose funeral was attended by so many who loved him and by so many who never knew him but came to honor his service. He lived like so many other kids in America, and who is and will always be loved. And that is how Matt should be remembered, identified, seen and heard.



*Matthew Snyder visits with family after returning from boot camp in 2004.
(Courtesy Jane Perkins)*