

LGBT community comes together to oppose unwelcomed protesters

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Erykah Lewis (right), a junior at Sacramento State University, shows support for the LGBT community during a protest by the Westboro Baptist Church on May 8, 2018, at the school. The church group is known for inflammatory speech, especially against the LGBT community. Photo by: Paul Kitagaki Jr./Sacramento Bee/TNS

A Kansas church staged protests at Sacramento, California-area schools last week.

Westboro Baptist Church, known for its extreme and hateful views, sent three of its members to protest at Sacramento schools last week. The church called the city one of the most immoral in America.

About a dozen counter-protesters stood near the women at the entrance to Sacramento State University, but they didn't interact.

In the campus library area, students and staff reacted to the protest by passing out heart-shaped stickers and rainbow pins and listening to speeches about diversity and inclusion. Diversity is having different types of people, such as people of different races or cultures, in a group or organization.

Counter-protest Shows Inclusion

"The Westboro Baptist Church decided to send a few of its members over to preach hate and fear and anger at a population of our students, and so it was very important for our community to come out to show its support for one another," said Beth Lessen. She is assistant vice president of student affairs.

The Topeka, Kansas-based church has staged protests across the country. Its members have protested against Jews, Muslims, military veterans, celebrities, mass-shooting victims and gay rights groups. Its members say they are fighting against sin, but the tactics are widely viewed as hateful.

Sacramento State was the trio's first stop. They waved signs saying things like "Mourn for your sins" in protest of the university's Pride Center. It offers support and services for the school's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community.

Shirley Phelps-Roper said she has been a member of the Westboro Baptist Church for 27 years. She travels every few weeks to protests.

Opposition To Teacher Of The Year

"What got our attention was (nearby) Rocklin," she said of this particular trip. Church members decided to picket Rocklin Gateway Academy. They believe a teacher there was named Teacher of the Year by the Charter School Association because she read a book about a transgender child to kindergarten students during story time.

Phelps-Roper said they stopped off at Mira Loma High School in Sacramento. They went there because "all schools teach sin," she said.

Tyler Cernohlavek, 19, is an assistant at the university's Pride Center. He said they have been running out of rainbow pins. "I personally find it important because it shows that our campus is a good place for us to be," he said of the turnout of about 200 students.

About 20 Mira Loma parent volunteers and staff members welcomed students to school, said Raj Rai. She is a San Juan Unified spokeswoman. Mira Loma is part of the San Juan Unified School District.

"Everyone is welcome and accepted at Mira Loma. Despite the protest and beliefs this group may have, all students are welcome, and we want to make sure all our students feel welcome and safe," she said.

Several Groups Unify Against Church

A counter-protest during the Rocklin event was being sponsored by the Gender Health Center of Sacramento. The Sacramento LGBT Center, PFLAG of Placer County and other organizations also planned to join the counter-protest. PFLAG is a volunteer group of family and friends of the LGBT community.

"We are hoping to show our support for the students in a very peaceful way," said Claire Buckley, the director of the Sacramento LGBT Center before the protest. "It's important to show diversity is accepted in our community. We celebrate diversity and we absolutely want to show support."

Elizabeth Ashford is a spokeswoman for Rocklin Academy. She said the school responded by shifting school hours by a few minutes to ensure students are all inside when the protest begins.

The church is widely condemned by mainstream Christians. It has previously protested at McClatchy and Granite Bay high schools in California. It also has staged protests at Sacramento houses of worship and the state Capitol.