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## Loud, raucous crowd combats Westboro Baptist Church

Armed with a message of God's wrath and "imminent doom," six members of the Westboro Baptist Church staged a peaceful protest outside San Diego High School Friday, but were overshadowed by a large counter-demonstration chanting messages of love and tolerance.

Hundreds turned out to try to silence Westboro's members, who wore shirts with the church's URL ? GodHatesFags.com ? on them. Members of the Topeka-based congregation also carried colorful signs that read, "America is Doomed," "Antichrist Obama is Doomed" and "with no explanation ? ?You Will Eat Your Babies.?"

One block north of Westboro's demonstration, the First Unitarian Universalist Church in Hillcrest staged a quiet, prayerful counter-protest, with signs that read, "God is Love." Directly across from Westboro's members, a large, raucous crowd of mostly gay rights supporters gathered shouting into bullhorns and banging on pots and pans, and waving signs that read "I Support Gay Rights and God Loves Me," "We are all One" and "Hate is Not a Family Value."

The 2:10 p.m. demonstrations were timed with the end of classes at the downtown high school, and students who streamed out onto sidewalks were greeted with the combating messages. Some were unfazed, others shouted in support of the gay rights groups, and one student passing by the commotion said, "These faggots have got to go."

Shirley Phelps-Roper, the oldest daughter of Westboro founder Fred Phelps, gave little in the way of explanation for why the church's members are in San Diego for four days, demonstrating at 29 locations. The church is targeting primarily Jewish-owned businesses, Jewish organizations and temples.

Phelps-Roper said the church is touring the country, trying to reach as many people as possible and that Westboro's presence at San Diego High School was an opportunity for the school's students to "see what good looks like." She also said the congregation's members were there to tell the students there was "no mercy" and warn the students "destruction is imminent."

When asked what she'd like to tell the students, Phelps-Roper said, "Get a Bible, read the word, shut your mouth and obey your God."

On Westboro's Web site, the church listed San Diego High School as a demonstration location and said, "Quit Telling Kids It's OK to be Fags."

Members of the San Diego High School Gay Straight Alliance were among the counterdemonstrators. The teen activists said Westboro's planned protest boosted the club's membership on campus.

Emersen Phillips, a 17-year-old lesbian who attends San Diego High School, said the counterdemonstration made her feel "empowered."

"I hear what [Westboro's members] have to say, and I acknowledge it, but it doesn't have anything to do with," she said. "I can be whoever I want to be."

Krysteena Ferguson, a 17-year-old senior at San Diego High and a "straight ally" for her gay classmates, said countering Westboro's demonstration with a message of tolerance sends a message to youth who struggle with their sexuality.

"It is really important to be who you are, and not deny it," she said.

Drew Garner, a 14-year-old heterosexual freshman at San Diego High, said he was "enraged" by Westboro's demonstration. Garner said he has friends and family friends who are gay, and he supports gay rights.

Garner said Westboro's anti-gay, anti-America, anti-Obama signs were "ridiculous."

"They're not changing anyone's minds here," he said.

Arvid Straube, lead minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church, said members of his congregation turned up Friday to send an "affirming" message to San Diego High's gay students.

"We wouldn't have given this any energy at all, but we wanted to show our support for the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) students, and show them not all religious groups think that there is something wrong with them," Straube said.

Part of the counter-demonstration. (Photo by Steven Bartholow)

The San Diego Police Department was on hand to monitor the demonstrations and direct foot traffic in the congested area. There were no incidents of violence and no arrests made, though one counter-demonstrator shook with rage and shouted at Phelps-Roper until police officers escorted him away.

Phelps-Roper said the church's protests are always peaceful.

"For 19 years, every single day we stand on the streets; we are peaceful, we are lawful, and above all else, we are faithful to the good word of God," Phelps-Roper said.

To read the full story and watch video coverage, visit:

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San Diego News Network

Joseph Peña

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