



Freedom Patriot Riders arrive in Clackamas to shield family members from the threat of God Hates Fags protesters at the funeral of fallen soldier Robert L. Jones.

when members picketed and provoked attendees of the 1998 funeral for Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyo. Since then, as an ongoing church activity, the group has traveled to make confrontational appearances at the funerals of military personnel throughout the country.

Not even Sweden is safe from condemnation. The group has constructed a memorial to celebrate Swedish nationals killed by the tsunami that devastated Southeast Asia in 2004. "Pray for Sweden's annihilation," states one report, as Swedes passed provisions outlawing harassment based on sexual orientation.

But the Westboro church has not gone unchallenged.

A group of motorcyclists calling themselves the Patriot Guard Riders formed to protect mourners from disruption. The nonpartisan organization, which publicly will make no statement regarding God Hates Fags, came into being as the harassment became publicized. Patriot Guard Riders only arrive when invited and act to shield mourners from any protest. Nationwide membership now tops 43,000, with an average of 1,500 new members joining monthly.

Hundreds of bikers from the Patriot Guard arrived waving U.S. flags at both funerals for Jones on June 29 in Clackamas and Tucker on July 1 in Redmond. Bikers at both events expressed repulsion at the disrespect shown by the Westboro church members' previous behavior.

"There's a time and a place for everything. Common sense and reason call for respect. They could do that in any public space," said Patriot Guard Rider Linda "Epic-woman" Snyder. "We're just hoping that Americans will become more concerned with who died than with whatever Paris Hilton's up to."

Equality on Task

Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski's Taskforce on Equality met June 30 in Portland. It engaged in its ongoing charge: to make recommendations about how to proceed in ensuring protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in employment, housing, public accommodations and other opportunities.

The current focus is the education of committee members on the condition of local, state and federal law and precedents in the courts through the testimony of expert witnesses.

Experts David Hicks, attorney Tiffany Harris and Marcia Ohlemiller of the Bureau of Labor and Industries presented case studies of harassment, the scope of current statutes providing protections across the state and the absence of comprehensive state or federal standards. The meeting was at times a free-flowing conversation. Most task force members actively

requested information and clarification from the experts and colleagues present.

Considered were *Li vs. Oregon*, *Knight vs. Superior Court*, a California Court of Appeals opinion and the *Tanner vs. Oregon Health Sciences University* cases.

The experts on hand concluded that 1998's *Tanner* decision did not address equal protection for the queer community, a common misconception, but only to the plaintiffs, employees of OHSU. While being a step forward, it did not bring the statewide issue to the court.

Up for discussion was the false dichotomy now advanced by political conservatives surrounding "immutability." The question posed is whether rights and protections can only be legally ensured if sexual orientation is an "immutable" or unchangeable state, like race or gender. Discussion moved to gender and how it is no longer immutable through surgical reassignment. More importantly, the state already provides protections to classes of people who are defined purely by personal choice—smokers, juvenile offenders, divorcees, pregnant women and breast-feeding mothers—thus nullifying the nature vs. nurture debate from a legal perspective.

Also presented was a federal government accounting office report from July 9, 2002, demonstrating that in states that had implemented civil unions and civil rights legislation, no prohibitive financial burden was recorded.

The task force's next meeting is Aug. 3 in Salem. A location has yet to be announced. Meeting minutes are available at www.oregon.gov/taskforce_on_equality. 10

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