

Tuesday, September 23, 2008

Angel Action

The President called me one day to tell me he'd gotten "the fax." The message from Phelps saying that he would be coming to Laramie for Henderson's trial, due to start Monday, April 5th. Romaine called me soon after. Like me, she was frustrated that the last thing people would see on the news would be his messages of hatred and intolerance. "Somebody should do something."

I mentioned an idea someone had sent me: great big angel wings, surrounding his group with symbols of love and peace. "Wow, that's awesome. Someone should really do that," she said. "Wouldn't it be great," I replied. She then told me that she had to go get ready for work at the coffee shop, where she used to see Matt on a regular basis. I went back to whatever pointless thing I had been doing. Two hours later, my phone rang again.

"How many angels can you get in Laramie, and who do we need to call about permits and shit? WE are gonna do this." I simply smiled and said "Yes, we are, aren't we?" She went on to tell me that she'd been talking with a friend at the coffee shop. When she'd mentioned the angels, he got chills. Being a handy sort of guy, he thought for a bit and started sketching. In a matter of minutes, he designed a simple framework for wings, and they already had 4 Denver angels lined up. Thus the angels were born.

We plotted and planned for a while. Romaine called Dave O'Malley, still a Commander with the Laramie Police Department. I called Tim Banks, Chief of the University Police Department. It turns out there were no permits required, and though they were a bit nervous about possible conflicts, we made arrangements for security and safety. We assured them that they would have no problems from anyone in wings and that we'd be going over plans with all angels in detail to ensure there wouldn't be any incidents.

There were 11 angels that first time. We gathered everyone together for a meeting beforehand, cramming people into the livingroom of my old apartment on Baker Street. We covered the basics, reviewing with everyone how Phelps operates. What they might expect to hear, and that everyone needed to fully understand this before they tried to wear a halo. We talked about how important it would be to remain silent, peaceful, and loving, and how difficult it might be. Everyone was given a pair of earplugs too, just in case the sounds of hate behind us became too much for anyone. And Romaine gave us perhaps the most important tip: "Pee before you put on your wings!" They weren't easy to get in or out of, so it was important to wring out the kidneys before gettin' our holy on.

We met downtown at her sister's shop, The Jaded Lair. Made from PVC pipe and bed sheets, the wings stretched out almost 8 feet. It was a true Wyoming morning, grey and overcast. Amazingly, there wasn't much wind, but it was still bitterly cold. We all wore coats and jackets as best we could while still strapping on wings. Hats and gloves were problematic, and few of us had them. After transforming someone into a "holy roller," they had to perform a strange form of limbo to climb out of the basement without catching a wing on the door.

We met in the alley briefly, and shared with one another our reasons for being there. "I want my daughter to grow up in a better world." "I don't want the last thing my nephew sees on TV to be Phelps." "I'm here for my brother." We were also supposed to come up with a happy thought to hold onto, so that we could have an angelic, peaceful smile on our faces no matter what horrific things we heard from Westboro. We then walked in a line down to the courthouse, dodging street signs and lamp posts. Crossing the street had to happen in 2 shifts, as we couldn't get all the angels across a light in a single group. Our stomachs were knotted, our palms sweaty, our bodies chilled to the core...and we pasted on our most peaceful smiles.



We could hear Phelps and his group shouting things like "Matthew Shepard is in hell" and "God hates fags." As we walked up to take our positions, the most incredible thing happened. Though it only happened for a moment, their group fell silent. They didn't quite know what to do about us; we had made Phelps silent. They quickly regrouped and redoubled their shouts and taunts, but we had love...and Matt...on our side. Our smiles beamed brightly. Our halos rustled in the breeze, and our wings created a white wall of love just as we'd hoped.



That's not to say it was easy. Seeing the young children holding up signs with messages like "AIDS Cures Fags" was tough, especially for the parents in the group. We hadn't quite seen that one coming. The cold was a big problem for us. We were standing in the shade of the courthouse addition, and started at 7am. We were concerned about frostbite, especially in the feet. None of us were dressed as warmly as we should be, and it's hard not to think about hate speech or hypothermia when trying to smile and be silent. As if all of this wasn't enough to keep us locked in the moment, we couldn't help but notice the snipers on the roof. Just in case something went wrong...

We had a few things to keep us going, though. We had amazing support from the onlookers, at least once they all figured out that we were not part of Phelps' group. My friend Steph ran home and returned with a thermos of hot coffee. We took turns passing it around - not to drink the coffee, but rather to warm our fingers and hands. Every now and then, one of the police officers walking the space in between Phelps and our group would whisper words of encouragement, "you're doing great, keep it up" and "thank you for being here."

After an hour we followed Uncle Freddy to campus for a second round, this time in front of the Union. As we walked, we sang an original song, "The Holy Pokey," where you put you halo in, then you put your halo out. This time we were in the sun, so it wasn't quite as cold. UMC, the Keepers of the Fire, and the Union's convenience store brought out a cart of food and hot beverages labeled "Angel Food." Sugar cookies and hot apple cider never tasted quite so good. Phelps and Company didn't quite make it through their second hour of protest; naturally we like to think it was because we successfully kept them from getting the attention, media coverage, and confrontation upon which they thrive.



As the Westboro clan drove off we let out a cheer, and those gathered around joined in with us. We all felt a huge sense of accomplishment as we paused for a group photo. It had been a tough morning, but we all knew it was worth it. We honestly didn't anticipate the amount of media coverage we'd get. We also didn't expect to be a key part of play, destined to become the most produced play in America and an HBO

movie adaptation.

My sister was an angel. My boss was an angel. Classmates, friends, and strangers. We stood together, not representing any one group, faith, or sexual orientation. We simply wanted to take a stand against intolerance and hatred. I still carry the memories with me. I will never forget the sun shining on the tree overhead at the courthouse. I remember thinking of Matt's smile the whole morning, struggling to fight off tears and maintain my own smile. And I remember the feeling of making a difference. I had rainbow angel wings and a halo tattooed on my ankle to remind me that we all have wings, we just need to stretch them more often.



Some time after the fact, I talked with Rob and Dave. They were in the courthouse that morning preparing for the trial, and someone called them to the window. It gave them strength and hope to face their own obstacle that morning. Another friend, someone with whom I had worked at the junior high during my student teaching, was also in the courthouse. She told me that she and her coworkers cried as the angels walked up. And I remember so many faces smiling back at us in front of the Union.

Today's lesson: Doing the right thing isn't always easy. Standing up and speaking out for those who can't is no easier. But it **MUST** be done if we hope to create a better tomorrow. Do what you can in the face of intolerance or discrimination. Do what you can, even when you don't want to. It will change your life in ways you cannot begin to imagine today, and hopefully do the same for the world in which we live.