

Student: It is Saturday November 20th and I'm in Lawrence, Kansas to speak with Libby Phelps about the Westboro Baptist Church.

Because the Religion in Kansas Project seeks to create a public record we'd like your permission to make this publicly available. Is that OK?

Libby Phelps: Yes.

Student: Thanks.

To start things off is there anything you'd like to say first?

LP: No.

Student: OK. I'd like to make it clear you're no longer a member of the Westboro Baptist Church.

LP: Correct.

Student: I know it might be a little difficult to talk about, but can you tell us a little about how you came to that decision?

LP: There were a series of events that happened that made me want to leave. Their views became more extreme. They started praying for people to die and they would specifically name people who I won't tell you. They started treating family and other church members badly, including me. So, I didn't think that was the appropriate place for me to live the rest of my life.

Student: In what ways would you say they mistreated other members of your family?

LP: I knew you would ask that.

Whenever they thought someone was doing something wrong – I would think they were insignificant issues – they would blow it way out of proportion. They'd get everyone involved and they'd bring everyone into a room. You sit at one end of the room and everyone would surround you and just say bad things about you. With me, for instance, they would say I wasn't helping enough, which I was. I took a full day off to go watch their kids. I did everything they asked me to do. It was just unreasonable and not fair.

Student: When you say they accused you of not helping enough, was that in terms of family life?

LP: It certainly wasn't in terms of picketing because most of the in town ones I went to and a lot of the out of town ones I went to, too. So it certainly wasn't that. I didn't know where they were coming from because I was doing everything that I can to help you guys and you're not grateful or thankful for any of it.

Student: When you were there, was it possible to make any kind of distinction between home and church life?

LP: They were inseparable. It was pretty much the same.

Student: After leaving, have you since joined any other religious organization?

LP: No I have not. I did go one time; my fiancé's family pretty much forced us, to go to a Catholic church. Growing up, at the Westboro Baptist Church, that was one of the worst ones because of the whole pedophile and idolatry and all that stuff. I ended up crying and I left the building. I didn't want to go there and I haven't been back since. I think it's all of the stuff I learned about other churches from when I was in the Westboro Baptist Church. I don't want to go to any other one because those were ingrained into us. That's the worst thing to go to, so don't go there. So, no, I haven't gone to any other church.

Student: So, as you said, what you learned as a member of the Westboro Baptist Church kept resurfacing? Were you uncomfortable?

LP: Yeah, I was uncomfortable. I thought it was a bad place to be.

Student: I think a lot of people understand the membership of the Westboro Baptist Church is almost exclusively your family, but I do know of a few individuals who came from outside. Can you tell me about some of those members and how they came to join?

LP: There are maybe two or three families that aren't a part of the Phelps family, which I'm a part of. There were the Hackamers and the Davises. The Hackamers were there when I was born. They've been there pretty much forever. Some of them have left and some have been kicked out.

Student: Are they a pretty big family?

LP: No. Maybe ten, not nearly as big as mine. Later on, this guy named Steve Drain did a documentary. It's called "Fred," I think. I don't know if you've seen that. He ended up moving his family up to Kansas and now he's a member of the church. He did the documentary and ended up thinking these guys are right. He does a lot of the videography for the church.

Student: Was he a journalist or a film maker?

LP: He's a film maker.

Student: So he was just doing a personal project?

LP: Yes.

Student: These other people, who came to join on their own accord, did the Westboro Baptist Church have any recruiting activities?

LP: No, not at all. It's not a social club.

Student: You mentioned that home life and church life were inseparable. What was day to day life like for you?

LP: Education was very important. You had to go to college. During the school year, you'd get up, go to school, come back, and eat a snack. Go to the evening pickets. Come back and do our home work. We watched TV a bit sometimes. I'd go to my cousin's house and we'd play Rock Band or something. In the evening, we'd have Bible readings. The once a week we'd get together at my brother's house or cousin's house and have a group Bible reading.

Student: But every night you had one with your family?

LP: Right.

Student: Can you tell me about those Bible readings?

LP: We'd just read the Bible and talk about it!

Well, that's self explanatory, but with our group that met once a week, we would go in chronological order. We would sing a song at the beginning, have a prayer. We'd be praying for people to die and for God's wrath to come upon everybody. We'd also pray, if someone was sick, for God to heal our bodies. Things like that. Then we'd read the Bible.

Student: You just said you'd pray for healing, but your family doesn't hold any beliefs along the lines of Christian healing or anything like that right? This would be in addition to medical treatment?

LP: Yeah, it's not like how some people don't go to the doctor. We didn't do that.

Student: So these weekly meetings had more of a structure but they were also separate from weekly services?

LP: Yeah, but the structure was largely the same. You'd sing a song, have a prayer, and then my grandpa would preach.

Student: Do any particular sermons from your grandfather stand out to you?

LP: I still have a lot of the sermons because he would type out an outline to give to us. I mean they were pretty much – OK. This is what he would do. He would look at the signs of the times around you. He's probably preaching about the Supreme Court case

right now because that's a big issue. So he stays on point. He reads newspapers and sees what's going on, then preaches about those subjects.

Student: And he'll tie them to the coming of God's wrath?

LP: Yup. Exactly.

Student: You mentioned education was a big part of your childhood, but no one in your family was home schooled, correct?

LP: Yes.

Student: Did you attend a public school nearby?

LP: Yes.

Student: What was that like? Did you have any tensions with the student body? Did they know who you were and who your family was?

LP: Yeah, all the students knew who we were, but some people were mean to me. Before we went to school, we were told we would be persecuted and hated and ridiculed. It didn't really faze me. It fazed my sister. She had a little bit of trouble but I don't really care. My personality is if you don't like me that's your fault I don't really care!

There was this one girl in high school that was really mean. Even when I went to graduate school at KU Med, there was this girl who was really mean to me so I ignored her.

Student: Can you tell me about some of the encounters you had with less friendly people?

LP: Yeah, it wasn't... They didn't say anything about the picketing. The girl from graduate school – OK, we were paired up to share a locker. She refused to share a locker. Any time we were in a group she didn't want anything to do with me. It was very immature and ridiculous. Was not very professional.

Student: Sounds like it.

LP: This one is either because this guy had a crush on me or he didn't like me, but he put gum in my hair. I can't remember if I dreamt this or if it really happened by somebody tripped me – I can't remember it! But I think someone tripped me.

Student: And this was in high school?

LP: No, that was in middle school, the tripping and the gum thing. I remember in high school some girl punched my sister in the face. Yeah, my sister is really short and little, so I stepped in the middle and grabbed the girl's arms and stopped her.

Oh! And so the teachers were mean. My seminar teacher – do you want me to tell you her name?

Student: You can if you want.

LP: Her name is Lisa Bolin. So seminar, you can leave and go get help with other classes and that's what I always did because I knew she didn't like me. I'd go, get a pass, and go get help from another teacher. So I left one day and the teacher, in front of all the other students, said, "I wish had the nerve to tell her what I thought about her." This is solely because of the picketing. She'd say, "I cannot stand her." I was a straight A student and she gave me a B in seminar. It was just so messed up.

Student: She would say that after you got the pass?

LP: She'd say it when I was gone, yeah.

Student: How did you find out about it?

LP: Some people liked me. A couple of the girls came up and told me she said that. I never brought it up, I didn't say anything. Then she gave me the B and that's when I said something because that's going to ruin my whole life, you know? She was trying to ruin my school career. Giving me a B in seminar? Come on. Straight A student. That's crazy!

There was another English teacher, too. She did the same kind of thing.

Student: Did you ever take the issue up with the university?

LP: This was high school. At the university, they were much more professional there. They don't know exactly who you are and I don't bring my religion into school. That's how I was taught; it's how we were raised. It's an inappropriate setting to bring it up. So I didn't have any problems really with the university.

Student: Did you take the issue up with the high school then?

LP: Oh, yeah! I didn't want a B, so I mean I waited until they did something that would affect me, but most of the time I ignored them.

Student: Did you talk to the principal? Can you tell me about the process you went through?

LP: Well, I went to my mom and my dad and they called and talked to the principal, so that's how it happened.

Student: Can you tell me about how you and other members of your family interacted with the general public? Did you ever have any problems outside school and outside the church activities?

LP: In a bad way?

Student: Or in a good way, yeah.

LP: Well... Everyone was nice and pleasant.

Student: Never had any problems?

LP: No, well there's one time I remember. I was walking into Best Buy and one guy was coming out and he says, "There goes a damn Phelps!" I just smiled. People recognize me all the time. Even here in Lawrence, I've been gone for a year and eight months, and people still recognize me in Lawrence. It's pretty weird. Where I work, people still ask me about it, too.

In fact, I just had this lady the other day. She called to make an appointment and she said, "Does that Phelps work there?" And I was the one answering the phone. I said, "Well that's me." She said, "Well you know what I'm going to ask you next, don't you?" I said, "I don't know what you're talking about, can I please help you?" I don't bring it up at all! Then she goes, "How are you affiliated?" I was like, "Affiliated with what?" She finally came out and said it and I explained how I don't go there anymore but she still was freaking out. "My family's in the military! I'm a military wife!" All this stuff.

Student: Just couldn't let it go, huh?

LP: Oh, yeah, could not drop it. She said, "Do you think we can work this out?" I said, "You're acting very hostile to me, I don't know." Two hours later she called me back and said, "I'm so sorry!"

Student: This was a call at work?

LP: Yeah.

Student: Where do you work?

LP: I'm a physical therapist over at a locally owned physical therapy clinic.

Student: OK. How old were when you started attending the picketing with your family?

LP: I can't remember exactly. I was five or six. Somewhere around there.

Student: And when did they start doing that? When you started?

LP: Yes, when I started.

We started because – my family has always tried to exercise and eat right and keep fit. Two of my cousins and my grandpa were riding their bikes in Gage Park. There's a wooded area where homosexuals would go and do nasty stuff. They tried to lure two of my cousins – who are a year or two younger than me – into the woods. A lot of times homosexuals like little boys. That's true and I still believe it. You know that North American Man Boy Love Association?

Student: NAMBLA?

LP: Exactly. They have associations for that so you know it's prevalent if it's a national association. So they tried that and when we started we were just warning people – and we used the word gay in the beginning. Gays in restrooms, watch your kids, or something like that. They thought all the other religions would come out against it and say this is wrong we need to clean up this park. That was the whole reason they started. When everyone turned against them, they thought this was a huge problem and it's going to get really big, which it has. It's blown up. It's huge.

Student: Would you say when people reacted negatively to this activity that's when it got tied into the end times stuff?

LP: I don't think that happened at the very beginning. It was later on when they got more intense. Every single day, when my aunt would send out an email, at the end she'd say, "The Lord is coming." It was every single day. That's definitely gotten way more extreme.

Student: It has definitely taken on that character, but when would you say that transition occurred? From trying to make people aware of something you saw as a problem to the end times?

LP: I would say within the last ten years. Ten or fifteen years. Not right at the beginning.

Student: From attending those picket events are there any encounters or moments that stand out to you the most?

LP: Yes, I remember a couple really well. One time, I was in Colorado and I was a little person, seven or eight. There was a big person for a little person, except for me. I was all by myself. We had this big banner because that was when we had first made the website, godhatesfags.com. Everybody was standing behind it, then there was a big person standing behind a little person, but I was by myself. There was this guy who kept spitting on me and hitting me on my butt.

Student: And you were only seven?

LP: Well... I was ten, nine, I don't know. Around that age. But I was little.

So this guy kept picking on me because I was alone and exposed pretty much. We were walking back to the car, and I had this sign covering my face, and these two people knocked me down. Two cops came and picked me up. That was a traumatic experience.

Then, more recently, I'm 27 now so it was probably when I was 23. It was when the picketing of funerals started. Do you know the Patriot Guard? Have you heard of them?

Student: Yes, they're the motorcycle people?

LP: Yeah, they have motorcycles, they try to follow us wherever we go, try to block our signs with their flags. They are violent. I just tell the truth about everything. They are violent. They hit me. They'd try to walk by and hit me with their hips to knock me down. You just have to stand with a wide base of support and they can't knock you down.

Student: So they'd try to walk by and push you over?

LP: They'll stand there and try to push you back. You know when you're playing basketball and you're trying to block someone? They'll do that move. They'll put their arms out and try to walk backwards. You have to stick your foot out and not let them do it. They're very violent. They'll stand next to you and rev their engines and blow their exhaust on you. They act like they're peaceful and they are not at all. They are probably the worst group I've ever encountered.

Student: Is it fair to say your family has had the most trouble with them?

LP: From my experience, yes, I've had the most problems with them.

Student: Going back to your first experience you talked about when you were younger, you mentioned there was an adult for every child except for you. How far away were you from the other members of your family?

LP: Oh, we were all behind a banner so there were people around me. The adults would stand right behind a little person so someone couldn't get behind them. Does that make sense?

Student: Outside of the weekly Bible meetings and services, were there any other ceremonies important to the church?

LP: It would be part of weekly church services but when people were baptized, that was a pretty big step in my life. And the Lord's Supper where you have wine and unleavened bread.

Student: Can you tell me a little more about the baptisms?

LP: Yes. You have to go and ask – it used to be every older male member. You would say I want to be a part of the church. Then they would talk to you a little bit and say, “Oh, yeah, I think you’re ready.” The baptisms aren’t just like fingers in water and squirtin’ it on your face. They were full immersion. During the summer time, there was a swimming pool you’d go to and in the winter there’s a baptismal area in the church.

Student: And the swimming pool is outdoors?

LP: Yes.

Student: You have to speak to other members, so this was obviously not an infant baptism then?

LP: No, it’s not. I was sixteen. Sometimes people were as young as eight.

Student: What sorts of things would you talk about with the other members to determine your readiness?

LP: They would ask why you want to be baptized. I said that I thought I was one of God’s elect and I was faithful to everything they preached. I listened and understood what they were saying. I remember one of my uncles said it wasn’t a social club. That’s all I can remember at this point in time.

Student: It sounds like when he said it’s not a social club they expected total commitment.

LP: Yeah, exactly.

Student: You said one of the things you mentioned was feeling a part of the elect. Is this a central belief to the church?

LP: Yeah. There are the elect and the non-elect. The elect are going to go to heaven and the non-elect are going to hell. It’s not by choice. You can’t to choose to be part of the elect, God chooses you.

Student: It’s pre-ordained?

LP: Yes.

Student: What assurances –

LP: Nobody knows for sure. You just have to have faith that you are.

Student: How does the Westboro Baptist Church support itself financially?

LP: They worked. That's it. Simple as that.

Student: Can you tell me about the relations with some of the other religious groups in the area?

LP: Not a good relationship. I remember when we were first starting; there was an Episcopal church in Topeka. They would bring their own signs that would say, "God is love," and they would try to block our signs and stuff like that. I believe in the First Amendment, I'll stick up for anyone. I don't think anyone should block them. I don't think that's fair. But that church I was talking about, they went and got a restraining order, we had to be across the street when we met them. There was a limit on how close we could be. They tried to get us to stop pretty much.

Student: Was there any religious organization your family had an amicable relationship with?

LP: Not really. There was a church from another state. They had a lot of the same views, and then they would allow divorce in their church. There would always be one issue where they didn't share the same belief and they would stop talking.

Student: One was enough?

LP: Yeah.

Student: How do you see the future of the Westboro Baptist Church in the long haul?

LP: I think the US Supreme Court case that is going on right now, that was the ultimately thing right before I left. A soldier's dad sued the church members who were there for picketing his son's funeral. The church followed all the rules when they were there. 200 feet away, they left when they were supposed to, and then this guy sued them. He won, the church appealed, so right before I left they said it's going to go to the Supreme Court and the US Supreme Court is going to have to denounce the Westboro Baptist Church. As a result, it's pretty much the whole of the United States is denouncing them. That's what they want. They think the Lord will come soon after that happens.

Student: So they see a negative ruling against them as a sign of the impending end times? Imminent end of days?

LP: Yes. They may have changed and gone on to something bigger, "Oh, now the World Court has to condemn us." That's the thing; they're never content with anything. They always have to find someone to pretty much harass. It's ridiculous.

Student: What do you think they would say if the Supreme Court rules in their favor?

LP: They would probably think that was a good move. They would say, “They have to follow the law.” As a whole, they think everyone hates them. They need to be ridiculed and hated in order to think they’re doing something right.

Student: What do you think the Westboro Baptist Church hopes to accomplish by organizing these picketing events?

LP: They want everybody in the United States and the world to see the message, reject the message, and thereby condemn themselves to hell for rejecting their message.

Student: Would it be fair to say that condemnation is reassurance to them as being part of the elect?

LP: Yes.

Student: We’ve talked a lot about the apocalyptic tone the message has taken on. Would you say they’re looking to instigate the end of times through that rejection?

LP: No. God is in control of everything. That’s what they think. They are looking at the times and seeing the end times because of what’s going on around them. They would pray the time comes quicker but they know ultimately they’re not in control.

Student: We talked before about how since leaving the Westboro Baptist Church you have not affiliated with any other religious organization. Can you tell me about how you would describe your beliefs now?

LP: I still believe in a lot of the moral issues that were instilled in me as a child. I still think homosexuality is wrong, abortion is wrong, I don’t believe in divorce. If someone asked me that, I’d tell them. I don’t go out and say, “I don’t believe in abortion.”

Another thing I wanted to say is, right before I left, my aunt called me at 6 o’clock in the morning. I wasn’t even thinking about leaving at this point – it happened like that [snaps fingers]. My older sister had gone a long time ago when I was fairly young. I remember it but it wasn’t that big of a deal to me. My aunt calls me, starts talking about her, and tells me how she’s a drug addict now and an alcoholic. She says, “You’re going to turn into that. You’re going to be a low life and suck at life.”

Student: This was after you left?

LP: This was the day I left. People kept calling me and I just couldn’t take it anymore. It was all of a sudden. It wasn’t like I had been thinking about it and planning it. It was the middle of the day, I was at work, there two patients I had to reschedule for later in the day, and I kept thinking I had to get out of here. I went back, a coworker and I got a couple of people, filled up a couple of cars, and I left. Two months later I bought this house. And I am not a drug addict or an alcoholic at all I hate that.

Student: I didn't think you were. [Laughter]

Do you think family had resigned themselves to the fact of your leaving or do you feel that by being so harsh they might have persuaded you to stay?

LP: No, once you leave they act like you're dead. You're not in existence. You don't talk to them anymore, you're dead. Another thing they did was – I left on a Friday. The next Monday, I work 45 minutes from Topeka, they drove out there and they stole my car. See, we helped each other a lot. If you needed money, they'd loan it to. Instead of going to a bank, you'd pay them back and you wouldn't have any interest. So, I had just started working and I needed a better car because I was commuting 45 minutes a day.

I emailed my mom and was very professional trying to keep emotions out. We had a joint account and I said I'd transfer money from there until I pay it all back. Then my aunt takes it over like she always does because she can't mind her own business. She said your mom and your sister don't want anything to do with you. Then she pretty much blackmailed me. She said, do this and this, give them the money, and I'll give you your car back. I did it within a day because I called people, told them what was going on, and things that would have taken a few days to accomplish they got done like that for me.

I emailed her back, it's done. She said she needed proof. I asked for her fax number to send her the documentation but she insisted I come down there to give it to her. She was trying to get me back into the house and I was not going over there. I had to call the cops because she would not give me my car back and I had given them the money, too. They were sitting over there with my car and my money. I didn't want to but there was nothing else I could do. I called the cops, and we went over. She lied. Every time I start feeling bad and missing my family, [I remember] every one of them lied. It made me question how honest and hard working they were. When I grew up, that was one of the main traits I thought my family possessed. They lied, they are not honest. She told a bold faced lie to the cops when she said she didn't know where the car was. Even though I showed the cops the emails of her saying it was there. I even showed them the emails where she said "do this and I'll give you your car." She was acting like she didn't know what I was talking about. She just lied.

Student: So, were the cops able to find out where the car was?

LP: No. She lied and the cops left. Then they were going to get a search warrant the next day. If there's anything to do with my family, things that would take a few days go like that. They cop said they'd get a search warrant tomorrow. That night, my aunt called the cops, let them fax the stuff over, and then drove the car out to where I work in Topeka. So at ten o'clock at night, I had to get someone to drive me out there. They didn't even fill up the gas tank either. It's OK though.

Student: That's quite a story.

LP: I know!