

Other Viewpoints

Protesters wrong to disrupt vigil for Great Bend teen

A candlelight vigil in Great Bend on Aug. 29 to mourn the loss of 14-year-old Alicia DeBolt drew nearly 1,000 people who felt the need to express their loss as a community.

The young woman, an incoming high school freshman filled with excitement about the future, was killed in a horrific manner that nearly defies description or understanding. The community of Great Bend gathered around the Barton County Courthouse, and around DeBolt's family, to offer its collective support.

That type of compassion is among Kansas' best traits. Unfortunately for this grieving community, the vigil also drew the worst Kansas has to offer – the Westboro Baptist Church and founder Fred Phelps' band of vile protesters.

Phelps' clan makes a habit of showing up at funerals to speak out about what they claim is America's sinfulness and lack of respect for God's law. Funerals – generally those of fallen soldiers – apparently serve as their most favored venue.

The truth, however, is that Westboro members only require one thing to disrupt a funeral – television cameras and the prospect of press coverage. The protests are more about public exposure – and about kicking people when they're down – than about spreading any sort of message or changing the hearts of Americans....

In addition to the pain these protests create during a time of intense sadness, law enforcement and, by extension, taxpayers have to invest time, resources, money and people to protect the Phelps from angry mobs – while those protectors no doubt would enjoy letting the mobs simply have their way.

To attend a community vigil for a 14-year-old girl who was murdered – and then somehow try to link that death to the wrath of a vengeful God – demonstrates a new low for Westboro members. This group comprises baseless, classless, heartless and Godless creatures that feed on the pain of others, contribute nothing of value to the world, and who violate God's commandments through their self-righteous actions.

– Hutchinson News, via the Associated Press

Where to write, call

U.S. Sen. Pat Roberts, 109 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. (202) 224-4774

U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback, 303 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. (202) 224-6521

U.S. Rep. Jerry Moran, 2202 Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515. (202) 225-2715 or Fax (202) 225-5124

State Rep. Jim Morrison, State Capitol Building, 300 SW 10th St. Room 274-W, Topeka, Kan. 66612. (785) 296-7676 e-mail: jmorriso@ink.org web: www.morrisonfamily.com

State Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer, State Capitol Building, 300 SW 10th St., Room 225-E., Topeka, Kan. 66612, (785) 296-7399 ralph.ostmeyer@senate.state.ks.us

COLBY FREE PRESS

155 W. Fifth St. (USPS 120-920) (785) 462-3963 Colby, Kan. 67701 fax (785) 462-7749

Send news to: colby.editor@nwkansas.com

State award-winning newspaper, General Excellence, Design & Layout, Columns, Editorial Writing, Sports Columns, News, Photography. Official newspaper of Thomas County, Colby, Brewster and Rexford.

Steve Haynes - Publisher
s.haynes@nwkansas.com

NEWS

Kevin Bottrell - News Editor
kbottrell@nwkansas.com

Andy Heintz - Sports Reporter
aheintz@nwkansas.com

Marian Ballard - Copy Editor
mballard@nwkansas.com

Vera Sloan and Rachel Bomba - Society Editors
colby.society@nwkansas.com

ADVERTISING

Heather Woofter - Advertising Representative
hwoofter@nwkansas.com

Andrea Bowers - Advertising Representative
abowers@nwkansas.com

Kathryn Ballard - Advertising Representative
kballard@nwkansas.com

Kylee Hunter - Graphic Design
khunter@nwkansas.com

BUSINESS OFFICE

Robin Tubbs - Office Manager
rtubbs@nwkansas.com

Evan Barnum - Systems Administrator
support@nwkansas.com

NOR'WEST PRESS

Richard Westfahl - General Manager

Lana Westfahl, Jim Jackson, Betty Morris, Jim Bowker, Judy McKnight, Barbara Ornelas, Kris McCool

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Hero's death leaves family with questions

Faith. I remembered a smiling kindergartner, wispy blonde hair, ever present smile. By the time I saw her dad last week, they'd had her funeral.

Shrapnel from a rocket-propelled grenade found her in an Army intelligence compound in Iskandariya, Iraq, not that long before her deployment would have been over. Ironically, she followed the last of the U.S. "combat" brigades home.

Her family had not thought Faith Hinkley would be a soldier. She headed off to the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs after high school graduation, looking for a career. When she came home and said that might be in the Army, I don't think her parents were thrilled.

Yet, by all accounts, Sgt. Hinkley was a good soldier. She worked in "human" intelligence, interviewing Iraqi women. The general who spoke at her funeral said she helped track down materials used to make "improvised explosive devices" to kill American troops and Iraqi civilians.

She was good at her job. Her commander wrote that her score topped the promotion list for sergeant, a rank she was advanced to postmortem. The Army also gave her a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart. They'll be treasured forever by her family, I'm sure.

A week later, her dad, David, admitted he was still in a daze. We have know each other



Steve Haynes

• Along the Sappa

for years, worked together at Rotary Club functions. He was my eye doctor back in Colorado.

David and Faith's mom had flown to Dover, Del., to meet her casket. The response when they got back to the San Luis Valley of southern Colorado, he said, was amazing.

Hundreds of people lined the highways from the Alamosa airport to her home in Monte Vista. State troopers, police and sheriff's officers, Patriot Guards, veterans, kids and elders, just plain people saluted her casket. Firemen used two aerial rigs to hoist a giant flag over the road to the state veterans home.

"We couldn't believe the response," her dad said later. Neither could the general, a hardened veteran who admitted it was his first funeral detail.

"People called and wrote from all over the state," David said. "All over the country."

Friends posted nearly 200 photos on her Facebook page. Comments on her "wall" run for pages. A Google search produces 10 pages of news.

From the airport to the First Presbyterian Church in Monte Vista, where she grew up, they saluted. They jammed the high school gymnasium where she'd played, trained, been a cheerleader, danced at the prom. The governor was there, a senator, legislators and leaders, nearly everyone in town, strangers and friends.

The general said kind words, praised Faith as a hero. A letter from her commanding officer said as much.

The newspaper said her dad thanked the crowd, and said how, when she told the family she wanted to join the Army, he'd suggested maybe she think of something else.

"What if everyone had that attitude?" he recalled her saying. "Who would serve our country?"

The honor guard loaded her casket on a fire engine for the last few miles to the veterans home cemetery. More salutes. More words.

In the quiet days that followed, her family had to come to terms with the reality of it all. Faith might be a hero, a soldier and a professional, but she was gone, a life ended all too soon at 23.

"Someday, maybe I'll understand," David said. "Someday, I know I will."

Steve Haynes is editor and publisher of The Colby Free Press and president of Nor'West Newspapers. In his spare time, whenever that is, he like to ride and watch trains.

Test mania driving dropouts

Students do not drop out of high school because they "flunk-out."

They are, for the most part, bored. Data in the study "The Silent Epidemic" released by Civic Enterprises (www.civicenterprises.net/pdfs/thesilentepidemic3-06.pdf) and underwritten by Bill Gates in 2006 still holds for today as drop-out rates increase.

Of those who dropped out, 47 percent "... said a major reason for dropping out was that classes were not interesting." The company they keep is also important; 42 percent "... spent time with people who were not interested in school." These were the biggest reasons given by drop-outs with high grade averages.

Sixty-nine percent "...said they were not motivated or inspired to work hard." They had little homework, but "70 percent were confident they could have graduated if they had tried."

Getting a job to make money was a factor for 32 percent. Becoming a parent (26 percent) and caring for a family member (22 percent) also were factors.

On the other hand, 35 percent cited "failing in school" as a major factor. "Three out of ten said they could not keep up with schoolwork, and 43 percent said they missed too many days of school and could not catch up."

Nearly half reported that they began high school "poorly prepared," having fallen behind in elementary school, and were never able to catch up. Thirty-two percent had repeated a grade and 29 percent doubted they could have graduated even if they had worked harder.

What was the response to this report? Immediately, many education schools and some states advocated raising the graduation age to force students to remain in school. It was a characteristically bad idea.

Instead, we should drop the age for compul-



John Richard Schrock

• Education Frontlines

sory education.

I had a student who had "burned out" on class work. While I was a high school biology teacher in Hong Kong International School, one of my homeroom students was not doing well. As we sat in conference in the headmaster's office, parent and student both present, the student explained how all that math and literature and science just didn't seem worth studying. It wasn't exactly that the courses were boring, but that he did not find that much motivation within himself to do schoolwork each day.

"I don't see why I need to do this," was his comment.

Even though we were an American school, we were overseas and not bound by state truancy laws. He was 15. My suggestion was that he take a semester off and go do something. There were jobs down in the harbor available to nonresidents. In the U.S., I would suggest an assembly-line factory.

The student and parent agreed. And yes, that next year he was back in school with a new-found appreciation of what really boring labor awaited someone without a high school diploma and how his schoolwork might actually be useful in life.

A century ago, schoolchildren came to our classrooms with a life rich with experiences, and the school provided the knowledge that helped them understand that world. Today,

many children have a confined life of limited experiences, rapidly narrowing through the new array of electronic distractions.

What we teach does not "connect" because they have no experience.

To compound the problem, teachers who once had the academic freedom to make class interesting are now required to script their lessons and teach to the test. And nothing is more boring than test prep. The recent upsurge in drop-outs can be laid at the doorstep of No Child Left Behind and will accelerate under its mutated offspring, "Blueprint for Reform."

Ask any assessed teacher from kindergarten to senior high, and they will tell you how they have narrowed their lessons.

Where they can afford it, they are dropping out.

John Richard Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher's college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.

Write us

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Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

