



Silent Witness PA Annual Report 2007

2007 brought an increasing schedule of events for the Silent Witnesses. The previous year our only event was the Harrisburg PrideFest and Parade. In 2007 we provided support for the 3 pride festivals in Harrisburg, Reading, and Allentown, and prepared to provide support for a fourth that was later cancelled (Lancaster). In addition, we provided peacekeepers for the staging of *The Laramie Project* at the York Suburban High School in February. We finished up the year helping Kutztown University prepare for a visit from Repent American, an event that had sparked violence the previous spring.

We provided training more than a dozen times for over 200 people, including 70 students at Kutztown University. We also participated in the Seven Straight Nights vigil in Harrisburg, sponsored by Soulforce and Atticus Circle. We received a major donation of 24 high-quality rainbow umbrellas from the Totes corporation, and they have therefore been designated as sponsors of Silent Witnesses. Silent Witness was nominated for the Allentown Human Relations Commission's Humanitarian of the Year Award.

Once again we met our goal of zero arrests at all events.

Following are details of the events in which we participated during 2007.

York Suburban High School, February 10

The Westboro Baptist Church protested the staging of *The Laramie Project* by the school. Temperatures neared the single digits as 13 protesters arrived around 6:45 pm. To meet them were over 150 counter-protesters, some of whom came from Lancaster and Maryland. There were a dozen Silent Witnesses on hand.

Originally the Chief of the Spring Garden Police Department and the school principal did not want the Silent Witnesses to deploy, fearing that our presence might be seen as an escalation of some sort, and that it would do more to "fan the flames" than to quiet things down. However, as the crowd of counter-protesters continued to grow, the Chief finally relented and allowed us to put on our vests and open our umbrellas.

This was a particularly difficult event for SW, from a number of perspectives. First, the authorities were reluctant to let us participate in the event. This made things much more difficult initially, from both logistical and tactical perspectives. Second, it was incredibly cold, even though we were well prepared with layered clothing and "hot hands" handwarmers. Third, there was a very large group of counter-protesters, which we really hadn't had experience with up to that point in time. Finally, it was dark, and the area we needed to cover was quite large, both of which presented tactical challenges. There were many instances of people attempting to get around the SW team and police in order to confront the protesters, though none were successful.

However, we got the job done, and there were no arrests of either protesters or counter-protesters. At the end, the Chief even asked us to help get the Westboro Baptist group safely to their vehicles. When it was over, the Chief thanked us and said “Your people did a great job.”

Lancaster Pride Festival, June

The SW Director of Operations met several times with a committee that was attempting to start a pride celebration in Lancaster. This included meeting with the Lancaster Police Department. Unfortunately, due to a lack of organization, this event was eventually cancelled for this year.

Reading Pride Celebration, July 15

About two dozen Silent Witnesses were on hand for the first Reading Pride Celebration. It turned out to be a beautiful day, especially because there were no protesters the entire day. The event was held in Centre Park, and was attended by some 1500 people (the goal was only 500).

It was fortunate that there were no protesters, since the festival was entirely open and free. The Pride Celebration Committee has been advised that in the future they should cordon off the park and charge a nominal admission fee in order to keep protesters from entering the grounds. We are planning to make contact with more Reading area churches and civic groups before next year to recruit additional local SW volunteers.

Harrisburg Pride Parade and PrideFest, July 28

We provided our annual support for this event with more than 130 SW volunteers. About 30 took part walking at the front of the parade (what has become our traditional spot), with many other Witnesses participating in the parade with other groups. Once again there was a large contingent of protesters along the parade route, primarily from Repent America (headed by Michael Marcavage). Harrisburg locals Michael and Sherri Sucec were also present.

Marcavage and Michael Sucec provided a significant challenge during the parade this year because they refused to stand still, insisting instead on walking up and down – and across – the parade route. It was clear that they were trying to get away from SWs, and they were constantly berating the teams for “stalking” and “interfering with their right of way,” constantly threatening team members with lawsuits. These incidents increased in intensity, leading ultimately to both Marcavage and Michael Sucec breaking SW umbrellas. While charges could have potentially been brought against both of these men (we were asked to do so by the Human Relations Commission), we felt that we did not have sufficient documentary evidence in order to press charges. These incidents, however, will be evaluated carefully in order to develop more effective tactics for the future, with the intent of preventing a recurrence of this problem. Should protesters break any umbrellas in the future, it is our intent to have them prosecuted – our “zero arrests” goal does not include acts of violence by the protesters.

A difficulty arose when the parade was over and there was a rush of people trying to get into the North Gate of the festival. It took more than 30 minutes to handle this initial surge, during which time the protesters were in among those trying to enter the festival. This created a situation that could have led to confrontations between protesters and participants. The Director of Operations will review the procedures for this gate, and make recommendations to the PrideFest Committee for changes in succeeding years.

There were no subsequent problems during the rest of the day. There were no arrests.

Allentown Pride in the Park Festival, August 19

The Executive Director discovered only two weeks in advance that the Allentown festival was on Repent America's protest schedule, and informed the committee that they could expect protesters for the first time in their 14 years of having the event. The committee was advised that they should cordon off the event and charge an admission fee in order to ensure that the protesters would not enter the main grounds of the festival. The committee agreed to do so.

This festival presented new challenges for SW. First, with such short notice, we were able to deploy only two dozen Witnesses (mostly from Harrisburg, since we didn't yet have the contacts or the time to train people in Allentown), which meant that we would all be working most of the event rather than the usual short shifts. Second, we were not as prepared as usual with respect to the event venue, since we weren't familiar with the park, and the festival was using only a small portion of the entire park. Third, few people in Allentown were familiar with SW, so there would be a certain amount of uncertainty in dealing with festival participants. Luckily we were able to make contact with the Allentown Police Department, and they were very cooperative and appreciative of having us there. The fourth challenge was that they serve beer at this festival, meaning we would potentially be dealing with inebriated participants – which proved to be the case.

Finally, as it turned out, the festival organizers had obtained the wrong kind of permit for charging an entrance fee, so they had to stop charging people to get in after about an hour. This resulted in the protesters entering the main grounds of the festival and setting up shop right in the middle of the festival area. This angered a lot of the vendors, as well as participants.

It rained most of the day. In addition, there was a competing Latino festival across town. This resulted in attendance numbers being much lower than expected, which may have been a good thing considering the situation with the protesters.

Ultimately, the event ended successfully, with no arrests. The Pride committee has assured us that next year they will have the correct permit for charging an entrance fee. We are planning to make contact with Allentown area churches and civic groups before next year to recruit local SW volunteers.

Kutztown University, October 9

We learned that Repent America (RA) was planning a "Campus Pro-Life Tour" for October, and contacted several of the area universities to offer our services in preparing for such a visit. Dr. Deryl Johnston, Director of the GLBTQ Center at Kutztown University, invited us to help prepare KU. The Director of Operations met with Dr. Johnston, the Chief of the university police, and members of the KU administration in two planning sessions. We then held two training sessions on campus with a total of about 70 participants.

This was not an official Silent Witness action, because the planned protest contained mainly an anti-abortion message, not anti-gay. However, we provided training for students, faculty, and

staff in SW tactics, and acted as advisors to the administration for the event because (1) this same group had been to the KU campus the previous spring with an anti-gay message, and the event resulted in violence and arrests, and (2) there was a strong possibility that the protesters would include anti-gay rhetoric as well during this event. However, the KU administration did not want to be seen as bringing in an “outside” group in order to deal with the situation, so we initially kept our participation to “behind the scenes.” Students used KU umbrellas instead of our rainbow ones, and had special KU T-shirts made up instead of wearing our safety vests. Students were given special ID cards that they could then use to check out a KU umbrella from the student center. Aftercare (for detoxing) was provided by the campus counseling center. In addition, the KU administration spent a great deal of time preparing the campus prior to this event, including circulating letters to all students and faculty asking that they ignore the protesters. Finally, officers from 5 different jurisdictions provided police coverage for the event.

RA director Michael Marcavage arrived with about 30 protesters mid-morning, and fanned out across the central “mall” space between buildings in the main part of campus, in about 10 groups. Jim Deferio was with him, though he did not preach himself...Marcavage did not do very much preaching either. It appeared that they were training some younger members of their group by letting them do most of the preaching.

Although it was intended that the SW Executive Director and the Director of Operations would observe the event from indoors, and offer advice on tactics to the KU faculty/staff indirectly, this strategy was soon abandoned because of the size and disbursement of the RA protesters. After only about an hour, we began directing students ourselves and moving around the campus to get a first-hand look at what was going on.

There were two notable events. First, one young woman with a 1-year-old child had a “meltdown” in front of the main group of protesters and began screaming at them about the graphic nature of their signs (containing pictures of aborted fetuses). We immediately intervened, getting her away from the protesters and ultimately putting her in touch with someone from the campus counseling center.

The second issue was RA’s use of “shills” within the small crowds of students that would gather before the protesters. The students were mostly following the administration’s advice about ignoring the protesters (although they were obviously curious), and were entirely quiet while observing the protesters. The shills were RA members who were young enough to pass as students. They would stand in the crowd and shout questions at the protesters, in an apparent attempt to get the students “fired up.” This was a new tactic, and we only recognized it after the fact once we began looking at some of the pictures we had taken. A more thorough review of our response to this tactic needs to be prepared. However, the use of this technique is likely to be limited to events such as this campus visit.

Mid-afternoon, Marcavage took about one third of his group and headed to a local middle school and did not return to KU. The rest of the RA members left around 4:00 pm.

There were no arrests.

Finances

Silent Witness raised \$1287 during 2007 from donations and speaker honoraria. Our expenses were \$4219, including advertising materials, travel, office supplies, umbrellas, communication equipment, and laptop computer (for training presentations). This resulted in a deficit for the year of **\$2932**.