



## **Silent Witness PA Annual Report 2008**

Silent Witness PA participated in significantly more events in 2008 than in 2007. We were involved in six showings of *For the Bible Tells Me So*, a concert by the Kinsey Sicks, a visit to Annville by Bishop Gene Robinson as the first stop on his national book tour, a multi-couple commitment ceremony in State College, four area Pride festivals, the York (PA) Unity Day, a presentation at the United Methodist Church in Lancaster, and rallies in Allentown and Harrisburg protesting the passage of Proposition 8 in California. This expanding role has really taxed our resources to their limits.

We provided training more than a 20 times for over 200 people, including again students at Kutztown, Shippensburg, and Millersville Universities (who used their training during visits from the Repent America group in October). We also provided training to a group in Charlotte, NC who wanted to study our methods for use at their own Pride festival. We have fielded inquiries from a number of locations around the country, including Baltimore and Atlanta, and from two additional universities. We also gave a presentation to Millersville University faculty and staff in preparation for a visit by Repent America.

In May 2008 Silent Witness PA joined The Foundation for Enhancing Communities (TFEC), which provides us with 501c(3) tax status and provides us with some administrative support. This means that contributions to SWPA are entirely tax deductible.

A highlight of the year was that Executive Director Alanna Berger was honored as the Barbara Gittings Activist of the Year by Equality Advocates Pennsylvania. This outstanding achievement recognized her many contributions to the GLBT community, including her work at Silent Witness PA. We are, of course, very proud of her for this honor.

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

Following are details of the festivals in which we participated during 2008.

### **Lancaster Pride Festival June 21**

Lancaster's first Pride Festival was a great success! Lots of vendors, lots of music, lots of people! The weather was just beautiful.

The festival was held in Buchanan Park, an excellent setting that gave a bit of privacy to the event, since the main area of the festival sat in a natural "bowl" in the middle of the park. In addition, Franklin and Marshall College fronts 2 sides of the park, which gave the event an added feeling of coziness.

Nearly 3000 people attended the festival, along with 10 protesters from Repent America and Life & Liberty Ministries. Although the street preachers sometimes made entering the park a little

more difficult by clogging up the entrance, our 3 dozen Silent Witnesses prevented any confrontations from developing. Once again, there were no arrests.

A difficult situation did develop at the end of the festival, when the gates were finally opened at 6:00 pm, at which point the street preachers entered the festival grounds. Although many of the festival goers had left at that point, there were still a significant number of attendees waiting for the music to end on the main stage. In addition, vendors were still trying to tear down their booths. The street preachers split up individually, with one of them taking up a position directly in front of the stage during the final number. They attempted to pass out literature and to engage the remaining festival goers. Silent Witnesses escorted each of the street preachers throughout the grounds, in order to ensure no confrontations. The street preachers finally left the park at about 6:30.

Another first for us at a Pride festival...we had a couple of counter-protesters as well. They were well behaved and did not attempt to heckle the street preachers.

## **Reading Pride Celebration July 20**

The Second Annual Reading Pride Celebration took place in Centre Park. It was a beautiful day, and the park was filled to capacity with vendors and visitors. The entertainment was lively, well attended, and enthusiastically appreciated.

Three street preachers from Repent America showed up this year, setting up shop at the corner nearest the main entrance. They initially stood right along the fence line, within a few short feet of vendors on that corner. When Steve Glassman, Chair of the PA Human Relations Commission, objected to the police, the protesters were asked to back off about 15 feet from the fence. One or another of the preachers would also wander along the sidewalk down to where the stage was set up. Several Witnesses followed them each time, preventing them from interfering with the entertainment.

The protesters were more than a little spiteful toward those attending. At one point, one of them singled out a mother and her 8 year-old-daughter for special attention. In addition to telling the little girl that her mommy lied to her, one of the street preachers yelled at the girl “And she lied to you about Santa Claus – Santa Claus isn’t real!” Unfortunately the police were not around to hear that, since such things can be considered “fighting words,” which are not protected speech.

The Silent Witnesses present at the time were, of course, appalled at the lack of civility exhibited by this small but vocal group. While it was difficult to not respond, all the Witnesses followed their training well.

The protesters left around 4:00, which felt like a gift. There were no arrests.

## **Harrisburg PrideFest July 25-27**

There were four official events related to PrideFest: the Voices United concert on Friday night, the parade and festival on Saturday, and the Spirits United interfaith service Sunday evening.

We were pleasantly surprised by the lack of protesters at the Voices United and Spirits United events, especially since the concert last year did draw the Sucecs to protest. The Spirits United service was just wonderful...an excellent “detox” for the Silent Witnesses, since we were publically recognized during the service. It was greatly appreciated by the hundred or so folks in attendance, many of them Silent Witnesses.

The Pride Parade ended up being shortened at the last minute because of a situation with the streets (Market Street was being detoured onto Front, so Front couldn't be closed as far as in previous years). As a result of the confusion, it turned out that all of the protesters missed the entire parade! They were all waiting down beyond Market Street, but the parade didn't go that far. It made the parade very enjoyable! The confusion also made the initial crush to get into the festival at the end of the parade easier to handle, since many of the street preachers were not at the Market Street entrance.

About 16 protesters were at PrideFest, including Michael and Sherry Sucec, members of Repent America and Heritage Baptist Church, along with several other groups with whom we are not yet familiar. It seemed as though the rhetoric was even more vitriolic than in previous years, and Jim Deferio did refer to Blaise by name a number of times, in addition to commenting on his profession...obviously Deferio has been reading the Silent Witness website! Deferio also made a number of disparaging statements about Unitarian Universalists, calling them, for instance, “bottom feeders.” We are hoping that a recent court ruling may prevent such personal attacks in the future...the ruling was too new for it to be used this year as a basis for moderating the protesters' speech.

There was one incident report required, when a group of young adults confronted Michael Sucec and attempted to steal one of his signs. This required Silent Witnesses to jump the fence to get over to where Sucec ensconces himself (across Front Street under the train overpass where the porta-potties are). They were successful in keeping the youths from causing a confrontation.

By 3:30, all of the protesters had left the festival. There were no arrests.

### **Allentown Pride in the Park Festival, August 17**

It was a long day for the Silent Witnesses at Allentown's Pride in the Park. Luckily, the weather was excellent and we were mostly under enormous shade trees. The Pride committee reported a record attendance for the event.

There were 10 protesters including Michael Marcavage, Jim Deferio, Steve Armbruster, men known to us as “Greg” and “Mark” (he brings his daughter, who looks to be about 4 years old), a short man who was at Reading and Harrisburg (we don't know his name), Jim Deferio's daughter and three other women.

Jim Deferio especially was launching very personal verbal attacks throughout the day. Mark and Greg were also making personal remarks, but not as vitriolic as those of Deferio. Deferio and Greg launched a new tactic, claiming that those attending the event must have been sexually

molested as children, and that this was the reason they thought they were gay. This provoked a few incidents of anger from the participants, including one woman who shoved Deferio – she actually had been molested, but she strongly objected to Deferio’s claim that this was a “cause” of her being a lesbian. Another man was visibly shaking as he yelled at Deferio, and had to be escorted away by a Silent Witness.

There was a counter-protest orchestrated by Liz Bradbury of Diversity PA, where volunteers would monitor the street preacher’s speech and ring a bell when they said certain “magic” words. People pledged money for each ring of the bell. This raised over \$1900 for area GLBTQ youth groups.

The protesters stayed mostly on the walkway approximately 80 yards from the main entrance – basically where the Silent Witnesses had first gathered when we arrived. Marcavage, Armbruster and “Mark” went to the secondary entrance where they spent most of the afternoon. They returned to the main entrance shortly before 5 and they all moved closer to the main entrance by 6 pm. They tried to hand out literature until 6:30 and then left.

## **Finances**

Silent Witness expenses for the year were \$6446, including advertising materials, travel, office supplies, new vests, umbrellas, and a projector and portable projection screen (for training presentations). Contributions totaled \$3807. This resulted in a deficit for the year of **\$2639**.