

This column by Sherry Chisenhall, The Eagle's editor, was published with the jump of "ROAD TO WESTBORO," a package of stories profiling nationally known funeral protester Fred Phelps of Kansas. A refer to the column appeared on Page One.

Over the past several years, The Eagle had developed a high threshold for covering Phelps' staged-for-the-media activities. But as his church's protests escalated, drew attention to Kansas and prompted legislation across the nation, it was important for readers to know more about the man at the center of it all — and to understand why The Eagle made it the Sunday display package. The overall response to the paper's decision from readers was positive, and the column certainly was a factor.

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Sunday, April 2, 2006

#### WHY THE EAGLE WROTE THIS STORY

Column: Sherry Chisenhall

You may disagree with Fred Phelps' message. You may disagree with his method. And you may disagree with The Eagle allotting substantial space on its front page today to examine who this controversial preacher and protester is, and how he and his Westboro Baptist Church have drawn a national spotlight to Kansas.

I realize some readers are offended by Phelps' ideas and actions, and they will be disappointed in us for examining those beliefs with such prominence and depth. Doing so was not an easy decision, and Eagle editors disagreed and debated at length.

But Phelps and his family have become significant news figures in recent months. Since last fall, the Phelpses have rocketed into the national consciousness with their protests at the funerals of soldiers killed in the war. In Kansas, where support of the war and troops is strong, some people find the protests particularly vulgar.

Legislatures in 27 states have taken steps to limit Phelps' ability to disrupt soldiers' funerals - actions that have only served to brighten the spotlight Phelps and his family drew to Kansas.

It's tempting to say the protests would end if the media didn't give them unwarranted coverage. But I don't believe we and other news organizations could ignore such unprecedented events directed at families that had already suffered enormous loss for their country.

As the protests escalated, and the Patriot Guard intervened to aid families, we kept returning to the same question: Why?

We wanted to understand how Phelps explained his and his church's actions, and what paths in his life brought him to the church in Topeka, and now to the sidewalks outside funerals.

We wanted to know: Why does Fred Phelps do what he does? So we went to Topeka and asked.

I've long believed that even if I disagree with a person, I should try to understand why he believes what he believes. Even then, I may continue to disagree with his ideas and values. Or I may find that I'm swayed by them, and my own beliefs are challenged. Either way, the road to that understanding often leads people to re-examine, and maybe broaden, their own views. Perhaps it spurs them to discuss and debate their ideas with others.

Ultimately, that's one of the best results a newspaper can achieve in its community.

Sherry Chisenhall is editor of The Eagle.

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