

When I retired two years ago, it was with the knowledge that I wouldn't have as much money to spend as I did when I was working. My partner and I have always lived on a conservative budget. Many people asked me why I retired so early and how I spend my time (as did my family physician on my last visit). My answer to the first question was to get more out of life than I felt I was getting from working long hours at a job that was becoming increasingly more frustrating as the pace of life was accelerating. My answer to the second questions is, now, PFLAG and helping to educate people about the GLBT community.

And I am doing that for a couple of reasons. One of those is related to the continuing attacks on the GLBT community by the religious right, as exemplified by Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. (I refer you to the contents of an email – see below – that I received from the Human Rights Campaign in regard to the comments made by Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson following the World Trade Center attacks on September 11.) PFLAG offers me the opportunity through its local Speakers Bureau to begin to change the views of a portion of society who might only get one-sided views from people like Jerry Falwell. The other reason is that until I retired, I remained in the closet except to friends and relatives. The first time I ever spoke publicly about being a gay man was at my first PFLAG speaking engagement, arranged through the Bellevue PFLAG Speakers Bureau. Since that first event, I have had occasion to speak to groups at the middle school and high school levels (both public and private), to community college classes, English As A Second Language classes and even a University of Washington Sorority. On each occasion I have had the opportunity to tell my story as a gay man who came out relatively late in life (age 33) but who has been fortunate to have a supportive family and a long-term relationship of over 20 years. Through my talks, whether to a group of 8 or 80, I have a chance to counter some of the stereotypes, answer questions, dispel myths and point people to resources that can help them make educated, not bigoted, decisions regarding the GLBT community.

While I don't have the same financial resources in retirement, I now have time resources to do what I find increasingly rewarding (though frustrating when dealing with people such as my State Representatives, Gigi Talcott and Mike Carroll, who continue to block legislation supporting equal rights for GLBT persons, and the likes of Jerry Falwell). So, my limited financial support goes to The Pride Foundation, GLSEN, HRC and PFLAG, because they each provide support, education and advocacy through different avenues. With the Pride Foundation, I know that my yearly contribution goes toward funding scholarships to deserving GLBT students and supporting organizations such as PFLAG. GLSEN gives me valuable information and materials that I can use in my talks, as well as providing insight into ways I can help change the education environment, making it safer for GLBT students. HRC keeps me up-to-date on the political environment and legislation affecting the GLBT community. All three (Pride Foundation, GLSEN and HRC) complement the time I spend with PFLAG, which now gets most of my not-so-limited time resources.

I recently came across a statement by Margaret Mead in some materials I obtained from GLSEN: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." I have discovered that PFLAG is just such an organization. From its small beginnings 20 years ago, PFLAG has become a global organization. But it is still the local chapter which makes the difference in each community.

Contents of an email from the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) follows:

HRC RESPONSE TO COMMENTS OF JERRY FALWELL AND PAT ROBERTSON

STATEMENT BY ELIZABETH BIRCH, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Our country is struggling to cope with the monumental horror of Sept. 11, 2001. We are grieving those lost and consoling those who have lost much. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans were among those killed and among those working to save lives. Like all Americans, we are coming together in the spirit of community to face the unimaginable challenges ahead. Sadly, one of those challenges includes confronting the dark prejudices that continue to haunt our daily existence.

The words of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson yesterday were stunning. They were beyond contempt. They were irresponsible at best, and a deliberate attempt to manipulate the nation's anger at worst. Falwell's subsequent attempt at apology fell woefully short.

The words of these men are similar to the acts of equally contemptible retribution that are being waged against people of Middle Eastern origin or appearance in some areas of our country. This is not a time for scapegoating, it is a time for unity. To blame blindly, based on prejudice and rage, represents an ominous part of our world and we must work to overcome it wherever we find it. It should be soundly condemned by all of us as we struggle to focus our attentions on healing the pain of our nation.

Partial transcript of comments from the Thursday, September 13, 2001 edition of the "700 Club"

JERRY FALWELL: And I agree totally with you that the Lord has protected us so wonderfully these 225 years. And since 1812, this is the first time that we've been attacked on our soil and by far the worst results. And I fear, as Donald Rumsfeld, the Secretary of Defense, said yesterday, that this is only the beginning. And with biological warfare available to these monsters - the Husseins, the Bin Ladens, the Arafats - what we saw on Tuesday, as terrible as it is, could be miniscule if, in fact - if, in fact - God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve.

PAT ROBERTSON: Jerry, that's my feeling. I think we've just seen the antechamber to terror.

We haven't even begun to see what they can do to the major population.

JERRY FALWELL: The ACLU's got to take a lot of blame for this.

PAT ROBERTSON: Well, yes.

JERRY FALWELL: And, I know that I'll hear from them for this. But, throwing God out successfully with the help of the federal court system, throwing God out of the public square, out of the schools. The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way - all of them who have tried to secularize America - I point the finger in their face and say "you helped this happen."

PAT ROBERTSON: Well, I totally concur, and the problem is we have adopted that agenda at the highest levels of our government. And so we're responsible as a free society for what the top people do. And, the top people, of course, is the court system.

JERRY FALWELL: Pat, did you notice yesterday the ACLU, and all the Christ-haters, People For the American Way, NOW, etc. were totally disregarded by the Democrats and the Republicans in both houses of Congress as they went out on the steps and called out on to God in prayer and sang "God Bless America" and said "let the ACLU be hanged"? In other words, when the nation is on its knees, the only normal and natural and spiritual thing to do is what we ought to be doing all the time - calling upon God.

PAT ROBERTSON: Amen