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## **Shawn Vestal: Spokane's version of Westboro Baptist blowhards deserve cold shoulder**

**Shawn Vestal/SR**

Mother's Day, 2016. A Spokane woman, trailed by a handful of kids and adults, marches through the Spokane Valley Target, waving a Bible over her head and roaring.

"Target would have you believe with their Mother's Day displays that they love mothers and children!" the woman shouts while being recorded on video. "This is a deception! This is not love, and they've proven it by opening their bathrooms to perverted men! I'm a mother of 12 and I'm very disgusted by this wicked practice!"

The shouter is Kristenea LaVelle, a member of the Spokane Street Preachers, a group of bellicose Christians who like to ruin people's days wherever they go, picking fights, recording themselves and posting the results on YouTube.

"Mothers!" the woman hollers. "Get your children out of their store. Mothers! Have enough decency to get out of this store. It's a dangerous place."

The brief video of this "preaching" has gotten a certain amount of attention lately, especially in conservative media, though the claims of its virality might be overstated. According to its YouTube page, the video has been viewed more than 48,000 times – a far cry from the 50 million claimed by the group. Viewers have given the video 130 thumbs-ups, and 1,166 thumbs-downs.

Still, this group's march through the aisles has become Spokane's latest contribution to the bathroom skirmishes – the silliest of culture-war battles. They are our own little Westboro Baptist Church, the loudest, rudest lovers of Christ around. The good news is that, like Westboro, they are spectacularly unpersuasive: They do their cause more harm than good with every public appearance.

The Target video made the Bill O'Reilly show recently, and it's a measure of just how far out there the Spokane Street Preachers are that they were given a dismissive reception even there. O'Reilly seemed amused, and pointed out that while the preacher was shouting, "she was approaching the Captain Crunch." His guest, Martha McCollum, said "Cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs, maybe," and said the preachers had a "warped view" of homosexuality and transgendered people.

The Spokane Street Preachers are the work of David and Kristenea LaVelle, among others. I attempted to contact them through their Facebook page, but no one answered my messages. The family did an interview with ABC News in 2014, when “Nightline” producers followed them around for two days, as the family – including the children – preached at people waiting to go to a basketball tournament at the Arena, and at Muslims arriving to worship at the Spokane Islamic Center.

They like to pick fights. They have taken their roadshow to Planned Parenthood, of course, and to local events like the Pride Parade, but also to churches that they believe are insufficiently biblical. Their videos are by turns annoying and engrossing – it’s fascinating to listen, for a short while, at least, to the creative invective (“This place is an abomination! It’s a stench in God’s nostrils! ... It’s a spiritual Elks Club!”) And there’s tension in the group’s willingness to flout common courtesy. There’s often a moment when someone gets drawn in by them, begins to argue and produces the chaos they seek.

In February, they went to Origin Church. “The holy spirit needs to come into this church!” shouts David LaVelle. “Jesus Christ is on the outside, knocking to get in! ... If you’re told you can go to heaven and still be in sin, you’re being lied to!”

As frequently happens, representatives of the group being protested came out and behaved with admirable patience – for a while. Eventually, though, someone took the bait, and began to argue. By the end of the video, everyone was shouting about who was the true Christian and who was the real liar.

The preachers pulled a similar stunt in front of the Cathedral of Our Lady of Lourdes last August, haranguing people as they entered for mass. An usher found himself unable to resist, getting into David LaVelle’s face and repeatedly asking: “Do you think you’re doing God’s work?”

I sympathize with that usher and others who confront these preachers, because who wouldn’t want to resist such boorish and obnoxious behavior? But watching the confrontations is a dispiriting reminder of the old saying about why you should never wrestle with a pig: You get dirty, and the pig likes it.

One senses that the Spokane Street Preachers see the Target issue as their cause célèbre. A recent Facebook post proclaims: “We are winning ... WE Are crushing demons ... WE are smashing target and we are defeating the homosexual demonic agenda.”

But Target is just one among many dens of wickedness. Earlier this year, the group traveled to Salt Lake City to hector Mormons as they lined up for General Conference. The performance included a cackling dress-up Satan, offering to call church founder Joseph Smith on his “hell phone.” Baffled children hustled past.

They’ve also preached outside a concert by GWAR, a heavy metal band who dresses in elaborate, grotesque costumes, and hollered at people waiting in line for the Chinese Lantern

Festival in Riverfront Park last October. At the lantern festival, an ingenious pedicab driver found the best way I've seen to mess with their game.

The bike cab driver was “blaring wicked music” in the words of David LaVelle – “Free Ride,” by the Edgar Winter Band. The driver followed LaVelle around with his bike cab, doing his best to drown out the preaching with the demonic strains of “Free Ride.” Eventually, a frustrated LaVelle said, “Only dirty people would like dirty music like that!”

The dirty people cheered.

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