

Atheist Nate Phelps on his father: I mourn ‘the man he could have been’

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(RNS) Nathan Phelps, the estranged atheist son of anti-gay Kansas pastor Fred Phelps who died Wednesday (March 19), is asking people to look beyond his father's legacy of hate.

"I ask this of everyone," the younger Phelps said in a statement issued Thursday about his father's death at age 84. "Let his death mean something. Let every mention of his name and of his church be a constant reminder of the tremendous good we are all capable of doing in our communities."

The younger Phelps, who is 55 and goes by Nate, is one of four of Fred Phelps' 13 children who renounced their father's activities, which included picketing the funerals of veterans, AIDS victims and celebrities and left his Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kan. The church of approximately 40 members of the Phelps clan is best known for its public protests and colorful signs declaring, "God hates fags."

"Unfortunately, Fred's ideas have not died with him, but live on," Nate Phelps' statement reads. "Not just among the members of Westboro Baptist Church, but among the many communities and small minds that refuse to recognize the equality and humanity of our brothers and sisters on this small planet we share."

He says he will mourn his father, "not for the man he was, but for the man he could have been."

The church has declined most media requests for comment, and in a blog post sought to put Phelps' death in perspective: "God forbid if every little soul at the Westboro Baptist Church were to die at this instant, or to turn from serving the true

and living God, it would not change one thing about the judgments of God that await this deeply corrupted nation and world.”

Nate Phelps moved far from his father’s theology, which holds that God is punishing the United States because of its tolerance of homosexuality. In fact, the younger Phelps has become an outspoken supporter of gay rights.

He left the Westboro compound where he was raised on his 18th birthday. In a 2010 interview, the younger Phelps said his father beat his wife and his children with his fists, a leather barber strap, or the wooden handle of a mattock, a tool like an ax. His sister, Shirley Phelps-Roper, accused her brother of trying to gin up publicity for a book, and said her church appreciated the attention he brought them.

Though he explored other forms of Christianity, Phelps eventually became an atheist. He is now the executive director of the Centre for Inquiry in Calgary, Canada, a skeptic organization. He issued his statement through the group Recovering from Religion, which assists people leaving abusive faith situations and where Nate Phelps is a member of the board.

“Even more, I mourn the ongoing injustices against the LGBT community, the unfortunate target of his 23-year campaign of hate,” the statement reads. “His life impacted many outside the walls of the WBC compound, uniting us across all spectrums of orientation and belief as we realized our strength lies in our commonalities, and not our differences.”

Nate Phelps announced that his father was near death in a Facebook post on March 16. He did not see his father before his death.

“My father was a man of action,” his statement concludes, “and I implore us all to embrace that small portion of his faulty legacy by doing the same.”