

In light of yesterday's double protest outside of our university's front gates, I wanted to share a view that most Georgetown students present might not have witnessed. I do not intend to defend either the Official Street Preachers' anti-Muslim or the Westboro Baptist Church's homophobic beliefs and hate speech. However, I do not believe that the counter protests staged by Georgetown students in reaction to these protestors always dealt constructively with the problem facing us. There were a great many students who held signs preaching God's love and acceptance, which I fully support; and yet, there were others who held signs calling these people "underdeveloped humans," commenting on their own sexuality, and even likening one of their members' appearance to Jabba the Hut. While many simply thought they were being funny, in reality it was this type of behavior that only incited the OSP and WBC groups to become louder and make more extreme and offensive remarks.

On the morning of the protest, I had just signed up to be with the DC Peace Team, which was at the protests to take a nonpartisan stance and cultivate empathy between opposing sides, when I received an email saying it looked like the WBC had already started on campus at around 11:00 am. Thanks to my relatively open schedule and a desire to procrastinate on papers, I headed out to see what was going on, and became one of the few individuals to be present at most all of the action yesterday, from about 11:00 am to 4:30 pm.

The Official Street Preachers did not begin their picketing in the morning with a loudspeaker. It wasn't until much later, after a mass of students had formed and someone started playing loud music to drown them out, that they realized their voices were not going to be heard otherwise. And so, as one group became louder, the other reacted by doing the same, and eventually the entire situation degraded into a competition to see whose voice could cover up that of the other.

I do not agree at all with the views that the Official Street Preachers expressed nor with the hateful signs they carried. I was pained to see how they verbally attacked my fellow Muslim students, and tried my best to protect and stand up for them when I saw that happening. And yet, I do not believe that these people were irrational, crazy, ignorant, or any of the many other names that students called them. I say this because of one experience I had that changed the way I viewed them.

One of the OSP group approached me amidst the noise of the protest, and asked me whether I believed in God. When I responded with a "Yes!" and a smile on my face, we instantly began a friendly, respectful conversation in which the two of us were able to each share our personal beliefs and hear about the other's. I told him that, as a Christian, I believe that Jesus taught us to forgive and love one another, that he gave us an example by going out to eat with the sinners and lepers instead of condemning them. He asked me my name, and proceeded to then share his own views about Jesus and the Bible. He did not change my views, and I doubt that I changed his. However, as we finished our conversation and shook hands, I was feeling genuinely happy and grateful to have shared that moment with him, amidst the shouting of voices and rising tempers all around us.

How could I have been grateful for a conversation with someone holding a sign saying, "Homo sex is a threat to national security"? In that short conversation, I saw how these people honestly believed in their interpretation of the bible; with their belief firmly in mind, combatting our campus's openness was not a way to force their hatred upon us, but rather, as they saw it, the only means they had of saving souls. As we got louder and attempted to drown them out by playing music, blowing whistles, and, on occasion, toting our own disrespectful and intolerant signs, their only option to make themselves heard was to get louder and make even more ridiculous statements, themselves. But I saw for myself that the OSP were willing to engage in rational, non-threatening and meaningful conversation, as long as the people speaking with them did not engage in threatening behavior by raising their voices, exhibiting anger or insulting them on the basis of their beliefs.

I know that my experience was a minority among those who were present yesterday, and I want it to be clear that I too felt distaste at the hatred expressed by both the Official Street Preachers and the Westboro Baptist Church. However, in light of the intolerance and lack of respect coming from both sides of the front gates yesterday, I wanted to share an experience that, I hope, will lead to a calmer, wiser approach to dealing with their hatred the next time that they grace us with their presence.