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Tucson rallies to protect girl's family from protesters

Arizona lawmakers pass an emergency measure to stop Westboro Baptist Church from demonstrating at the funeral of Christina Green, 9. Outraged residents make plans to shield her family.

January 11, 2011 | By Seema Mehta and Nicole Santa Cruz, Los Angeles Times

Reporting from Tucson — Arizona lawmakers moved quickly Tuesday to try to block protesters from the funeral of 9-year-old shooting victim Christina Green, passing an emergency measure prohibiting protests within 300 feet of any funeral services.

In addition to the new law, hundreds of Tucson residents were making contingency plans to try to protect the family of the girl who was slain in Saturday's rampage.

The actions were prompted by the Westboro Baptist Church, a publicity-seeking Kansas congregation known for demonstrating at the funerals of U.S. soldiers, arguing that their deaths are retribution by God for America's acceptance of homosexuality. The church announced it would protest Green's funeral, scheduled for Thursday, because the family is Catholic.

The protest drew instant and unanimous condemnation from Arizonans.

"Protesting or picketing outside the funeral of an innocent victim is despicable," said House Speaker Kirk Adams. "It's time to bring Arizona in line with the many other states that protect the sensitivities of victims against groups that use fear and hate to denigrate the lives of Americans."

Adams sponsored the emergency measure that prohibits people from picketing or protesting within 300 feet of any residence, cemetery, funeral home, church, synagogue or other establishment during or within one hour of a funeral service or burial service.

The House and Senate passed the bill unanimously Tuesday. Gov. Jan Brewer signed the measure Tuesday evening.

The founder of the Westboro Baptist Church, Fred Phelps, has traveled with his daughters and granddaughters throughout the county picketing soldiers' funerals, prompting new state and local laws to keep them away from grieving families. The Supreme Court has agreed to take up a free-speech case related to the funeral protests.

Tucson residents are preparing to line the funeral procession for Green, both to show their support of the family and to block them from seeing the Westboro protest.

"We just want to show the families in Tucson that we're a community that's bound together, through the good and the bad," said Janna Zankich, a 46-year-old dance studio manager.

On Tuesday evening, she planned to gather with dozens of people at Breakout Studios to construct 8- to 10-foot wings that volunteer "angels" would wear along the funeral procession to block the family's view of the protesters.

Residents' grass-roots response to the church's planned protest has spread quickly through social media.

A friend of Zankich's, Christin Gilmer, put up a Facebook page calling for volunteers to help protect the family from picketers from Westboro. Hundreds of volunteers have said they would attend.

Trevor Hill, a University of Arizona junior, is trying to coordinate the myriad groups so they are a calming and peaceful force on Thursday.

"Our goal is to be silent. We don't need to be a distraction — these are funeral processions," he said. "No signs or music, no counter-protests. Do not engage Westboro Baptist. It's just not worth it, and it's equally disrespectful for the family for us to be yelling."

Hill also hopes to show the world a different side of Tucson.

"There have been people claiming Arizona is the center of intolerance, the mecca of bigotry. That is absolutely not true. These are people who live their lives and want to raise families," he said. "It's honestly a very special community."

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