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There are still people who hate us enough to kill us. We do have to pay attention. We do have to stand up and stay vigilant.

Romaine Goddess

Talk Radio diva and GLBT activist gets serious about Pride

By Patrick Roland

All Romaine Patterson ever wanted to be was a rock star. Instead, after the brutal murder of her best friend Matthew Shepard, she became a vocal gay activist, standing bravely in front of Fred Phelps and his anti-gay attacks in angel wings with friends at the murder trials for Shepard's assailants.

She would later do advocacy work for GLAAD and is now (along with Derek Hartley) the host of her own radio talk show, the Derek and Romaine Show on Sirius Radio.

Patterson has become a fixture at Phoenix Pride in recent years and will again serve as the event's master of ceremonies on the main stage. She calls Phoenix Pride her favorite GLBT festival and says after at least four years with the organization (maybe five —she loves it so much she can't remember) she "kind of can't live without it."

Patterson recently became a mother and talked with Echo about her role as Shepard's angel, her continued advocacy work for GLBT people, the nature of hate crimes and her "abrasive," sometimes "raunchy" radio personality.

"I'm not a rock star, but I am a radio star and it's still pretty good," Patterson said. "I am allowed to be myself every day. It's therapy I don't have to pay for. I could see myself doing this forever."

Echo: What made you decide to don angel wings for Matthew Shepard?

Patterson: It was a desire to protect Matthew's family — for them to be able to walk in to the courthouse when I knew what was going to happen in there was already going to be difficult for them. I thought 'why isn't anyone doing anything to show that this guy (Phelps) is really about hate.' I thought 'maybe the story should be told in a different way. Instead of having the news focusing on hatred, why not have it show people the difference between hatred and love.' It was about a group of people saying 'we can stand up and we can make a difference.' Each of us has a powerful voice within us. Often times, we feel as one person we can't make a difference, when in reality, we can. It's often as easy as sharing your thoughts, your feelings or (laughs) dressing up as an angel.

Echo: Did you have any idea you would become famous for it?



Patterson: If I had known that, I might not have done it (laughs). It wasn't just me. There were a lot of people who for the very same reasons stood up beside me. I often feel over-credited. People use the idea all over the place. I am always hearing things. It always warms my heart. I feel like what it did was encourage people to stand up. Instead of sitting idly by and watching it happen, people can do something. People can realize 'I can do this too.'

Echo: What is it like seeing yourself being portrayed on screen by someone like Christina Ricci (in the HBO version of The Laramie Project).

Patterson: It was pretty weird! I have had hundreds upon hundreds of women play me over the years. It's one of the most produced plays ever. It's always a boost to the ego. Whenever I feel bad about things, I Google myself and find more people who have played me and it makes me feel good to know I did something in my life where I was a role model.

Echo: It's been almost 10 years since Matthew's murder. Why are there still so many hate crimes, like the recent Lawrence King murder? Why are some of them ignored?

Patterson: When you look at hate crimes, it comes down to a principle that lives within all of us. Overcoming our inner hatred is really, really difficult. It's an instinct bred within us to dislike people for whatever reason. It's a lot of self-work — stopping and really thinking about who you hate. It's about eradicating hate in its most simple form. It's about breaking it down to that core issue and talking about it. If you don't say anything, the situation isn't being resolved. It's much easier to hate someone than it is to love them. Sometimes gay people feel too comfortable. We need reminders that there are a lot of people fighting against us. We get so complacent. We forget we still have work to do. There are still people who hate us enough to kill us. We do have to pay attention. We do have to stand up and stay vigilant.

Echo: What is your radio show like?

Patterson: It's extremely different from the stuff I did with Matthew. My radio personality is abrasive, insane and sometimes raunchy. Here we are this gay show on this gay channel amidst all the mainstream stuff. Over the years we've gotten more and more heterosexual listeners. Straight people are becoming way more comfortable with gay sexuality as a result of the things we talk about on the show. The education the channel has done on a mainstream level is phenomenal. They learn a lot more than they ever intended to. I have done a lot of activism over the years but we educate people just by being ourselves. It's a new form of activism. It breaks down stereotypes people have about gay people.

Echo: What do you think Matthew would think about the work you have done since his death?

Patterson: I have had two important men in my life. I had Matthew and my brother (who died of complications from AIDS). When I make decisions in my life, I think of those two guys. I live my life with the hope I will leave this world a better place than the way I found it. There is power in words and actions. I think Matthew would be very pleased. Sometimes you have friends who will really honor you, and if any of us have friends like that, we are really, really lucky.

Reach the reporter at editor@echomag.com.

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