Hillsdale High students prepare counter-rally to anti-gay protest

By Neil Gonzales
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SAN MATEO — Hillsdale High School students are preparing for a real-life drama.

They are organizing a counterprotest to an anti-gay church's planned picketing of the school's production next week of "The Laramie Project," a play about the town in Wyoming near where 21-year-old Matthew Shepard was kidnapped and severely beaten in 1998 because he was gay. Shepard died a few days later from his injuries.

Members of the Kansas-based Westboro Baptist Church are expected to picket outside Hillsdale on March 27 before the start of a performance.

When Hillsdale senior Meghan Souther first learned about the church's protest, she said, "I was a little bit shocked."

But now she's looking forward to it. "I'm more excited now they are coming (because) we want to show people in San Mateo and our high school that we don't tolerate hate," said Souther, 17, a stage manager for the play, which runs several days.

The counter-rally could draw hundreds of supporters — including students from other Bay Area high schools and universities, said Hillsdale Theater Director Allison Gamlen.

Organizers will hold the student rally in the courtyard inside the school and are encouraging participants to wear all white to represent peace or rainbow colors to symbolize diversity, Gamlen said.

"We want to keep this a positive experience," she said. "This is a teachable moment about civil rights and human rights. We also want students to feel empowered."

The peaceful showdown will evoke a kind of life-imitating-art moment, she added.

That's because church founder Fred Phelps is portrayed in the play picketing Shepard's funeral as he did in real life, she said. "So he's actually a character in the play."

Over the years across the country, the church has picketed school productions of "The Laramie Project" and staged other anti-gay protests.

"'The Laramie Project' is such a good place for us to picket because it only has one function — it teaches rebellion," said Shirley Phelps-Roper, one of Phelps' daughters. The students' "moral compass has been shattered."

A handful of church members will protest at Hillsdale, Phelps-Roper said. "What we hope to accomplish is to show them what good looks like and tell them what God requires of them, and that is to obey."

In a news release, the church said it plans a "religious protest" against a gay "propaganda play."
In January, its members protested at Gunn High in Palo Alto, attributing a recent spate of apparent student suicides to a lack of religious faith.

Hillsdale junior Aaron Chacon says Westboro Baptist is exercising its right to express its views.

“Just as long as they are not violent or jeopardize our show, I don’t have a problem with it,” said Aaron, 16, a cast member in the play.

But he doesn’t agree with the church’s message, the teen said. "I hope my school community will be able to understand "... we are able to counteract hate without provoking hate."

To show that, he said, students also intend to silently march past picketing church members.

"It's essentially using love to protest hate," he said.