

Customers rally in support of Warrenton restaurant

Fast-food fans flock to fried chicken chain Chick-fil-A

BY STEVE CAMPBELL
Times-Democrat Staff Writer

A backlash backfired Wednesday at the Warrenton Chick-fil-A restaurant where thousands of customers rallied in support of the fast-food chain and freedom of religion and speech.

Chicken sandwich fans flocked to the fast-food chain for "Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day" Wednesday.

The 1,615-store chain became embroiled in controversy after national media picked up on a comment company President and CEO Dan Cathy made to the Biblical Recorder newspaper in a July 16 company profile reposted by Baptist Press.

The article — "Guilty as charged," Cathy said of Chick-fil-A's stand on biblical and family values" — talks about

Cathy's family's biblical-based approach to business, and notes that "some have opposed the company's support of the traditional family."

"Well, guilty as charged," said

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Today, we're all Baptists.

Father James Gould

Cathy when asked about the company's position," the article said.

He said, "We are very much supportive of the family — the biblical definition of the family unit. We are a family-owned business, a family-led busi-

ness, and we are married to our first wives. We give God thanks for that."

The comments launched a storm of protest. Human Rights Campaign posted the Chick-fil-A logo on its website with the words, "We Didn't Invent Discrimination. We Just Support It."

The group claims the CEO's remarks have hurt the company's business.

"Chick-fil-A's brand suffered particularly in the South, where the chain's rating with consumers has dropped from an 80 to a 44 since Cathy's anti-LGBT remarks," HRC said on its website.

The group noted that the restaurant chain has a strong following throughout the south, "but the sheer number of stores couldn't protect it from the consumer backlash."

But throughout Northern Virginia, conservative Christians, as well as free-speech advocates, created a backlash against the backlash.

At the Gainesville Chick-fil-A, customers circled the restaurant in cars three deep awaiting a chance at the drive-thru. Huge crowds were reported at stores throughout the area.

"Today, we're all Baptists," said Father James Gould, of St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church.

"Catholics are very sensitive to freedom of speech and freedom of religion, and it took a good Baptist to wake us all up on where freedom of religion stands today," he said.

In Warrenton, customers jammed the restaurant. Cars circled the parking lot waiting for an open slot, while drive-thru customers overflowed onto Broadview Avenue.

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BY THE
NUMBERS

1,500

Transactions at Chick-fil-A in a typical day

2,600

Transactions on Wednesday

5,000

Customers served in Warrenton

RALLY

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After the dust had settled Thursday, Chick-fil-A Marketing Director Stephanie Kennedy reported that the restaurant had 2,600 transactions Wednesday, compared to 1,500 on a typical mid-week day, for a total of about 5,000 guests served.

"Sales for Wednesday beat out our all time record day by 30 percent," Kennedy said.

Inside the store on Wednesday, patrons stood in a line that snaked all the way back to the restrooms before doubling back on itself.

Families with children — babies to teens — filled the tables. Working stiffs in uniform shirts stood in line with moms and dads, seniors and singles.

"I'm getting a good meal and I'm showing my support for the free market," said Mike Lillard of Warrenton, standing in line with daughter Emory, 7, and son, Weston, 5.

"It's easy to protest when you love the food," he said.

Patricia Walker waited at the register with her two daughters, Claire, 10, Rachel, 12, and their friend Ashley Lehman, 13.

On their way to gymnastics practice, they stopped at the restaurant for a meal and to make a statement.

"We live in a country where you should be able to express your beliefs," Walker said. "People should be able to disagree, but it shouldn't be ugly, and that's what I feel like this has turned into."

A self-described "senior hippie," Jane Opinski of Bealeton said, "I'm from the '60s. I'll protest anything I believe in."

"First of all, I love Chick-fil-A," she said when asked why

she visited the store Wednesday. "Second of all, they're a Christian organization, and I give them credit for standing up for what they believe."

Mike Gomez, 18, and Nicole Weaver, 19, on their way home to Arlington after camping for a few days in Shenandoah National Park, seemed amused by the spectacle.

Just hungry, they hadn't heard a word about the appreciation day. "We just love Chick-fil-A," they shouted in unison.

For Tim Whitney, the outcry over Cathy's remarks was a wake-up call to a new level of intolerance in American society.

"People are becoming aware of what's at risk — basic freedoms," Whitney said. "When mayors start telling businesses they can't open doors in their locations, there's something wrong with America."

Lillard of Warrenton agreed. "For a politician to use this matter to try to shut down the free market is just amazing."

Struggling with two large bags of food, Juliann Flynn headed to her car with lunch for her office in The Plains.

She'd just spent a little more than \$80 for a platter of chicken, another of salad and two large jugs of iced tea.

"Every Wednesday, our office orders out and someone suggested that since this was Chick-fil-A day to come here," she said. "Everyone's entitled to their opinion."

The scene at Chick-fil-A Wednesday reminded Father Mark Moretti of St. John's of the end of the movie "It's a Wonderful Life."

"Everybody came in and said, 'We love you, George,' except in here it's 'We love you, Chick-fil-A,'" Moretti said.

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