

August 13, 2005

## Mother's Grief-Fueled Vigil Becomes Nexus for Antiwar Protesters

By [ANNE E. KORNBLUT](#)

CRAWFORD, Tex., Aug. 12 - This is not the place to expect a sighting of Viggo Mortensen, the star of "The Lord of the Rings." Or at least it wasn't when President Bush began his annual vacation here earlier this month.

But something has happened to Crawford over the last week. The sleepy summer air has been punctured by a blast of antiwar energy, with carloads of activists appearing every afternoon to join a vigil begun by the mother of a soldier who died in Iraq.

Flowers are delivered by the dozen at Camp Casey, as the muddy outpost established by the mother, Cindy Sheehan, near the Bush ranch is now called. White crosses have been hammered into the dirt, pink banners strewn across the trees, the police posted at bends in the road to wave gawkers along.

When Mr. Mortensen drove up the dusty lane unannounced on Thursday to huddle with Ms. Sheehan in a roadside trailer, it was just one more jarring sight in a small town accustomed to seeing mostly the reporters and buttoned-down administration officials it has come to know over the last five years.

No one has been more challenged by the round-the-clock campsite than Mr. Bush, who sped past in his motorcade for the first time on Friday and, as expected, did not stop to grant Ms. Sheehan's request for a meeting.

But even before Ms. Sheehan arrived, this sort of challenge was not entirely an unexpected one for Mr. Bush, who by the end of this summer will have spent more time away from the White House than any other president in history. His five-week sojourn at his 1,600-acre ranch offers the protesters ample opportunity to camp out for extended periods in front of the national media at a time of sharp spikes in the casualties in Iraq, and as public polling data suggests the lowest support for the war since it began.

Thus has Ms. Sheehan's vigil been able to focus what had become a scattershot antiwar effort. And in the process, she has triggered resentment in Crawford, within her own divided family and across the nation, from those who say her son's death does not give her the authority to criticize the war. The Fox News television host Bill O'Reilly has called her "treasonous," conservative bloggers have accused her of furthering a liberal agenda, and one local shopkeeper suggested unleashing skunks on her and her supporters to drive them out of town.

Casey Kelley, 61, a semiretired real estate broker from Colorado who drove 1,000 miles in her camper with her dog, Lucky, to help Ms. Sheehan, said: "It's us versus them again. I haven't felt this since the Vietnam War."

How one 48-year-old woman from Vacaville, Calif., invigorated the antiwar movement, altered the landscape of the president's vacation town and drew a Hollywood celebrity out into the Texas heat may be as much the result of external factors as Ms. Sheehan's compelling tale. Unlike earlier Crawford protests that lasted a day or two and drew little attention outside Texas, her encampment, now entering its second week, has turned into a daily stage for interviews and encounters between the war's advocates and critics.

On Friday, as Ms. Sheehan waited for the presidential motorcade to come by, she was approached by a soldier from Fort Hood, Tex., who had been in Iraq and wanted to challenge her view that there is nothing good about the war. She pulled him away from the glare of the cameras to explain the impact of her son's death. Afterward, she said the soldier had admitted that his mother would probably be protesting as well if he died.

"I told him, I think we both agree, we want the troops to come home as soon as possible," she said later, as she rested in a trailer. "The difference is our definition of 'soon.'"

The toll of her son's death has carried over into Ms. Sheehan's marriage: She said she and her husband separated a few months ago as a result of the war, and of her activism. Although she and her estranged husband are both Democrats, she said she is more liberal than he is, and now, more radicalized.

"He agrees with the philosophy of what I'm doing," Ms. Sheehan said, "but not the intensity. He wanted me to pull back, but I couldn't. We grieved in two completely different ways."

Earlier this week, relatives on Mr. Sheehan's side of the family issued public statements attacking Ms. Sheehan for her protest. Only her surviving son, Adam, will join her at the site in a few weeks; her two daughters are in Europe, she said, "hopefully enjoying themselves" after a year of grieving.

Ms. Sheehan's natural, sincere look and earthy appearance on television do not betray the semiprofessional operation running the show at Camp Casey: organizers from Code Pink, a women's peace organization, and a public relations expert from Fenton Communications, are in constant Blackberry and cellphone communication with the news media and keep careful watch of Ms. Sheehan's schedule.

They said the bills for their work are being paid by donations and various groups.

In another publicity-savvy move, Ms. Sheehan and a group of military families known as Gold Star Families for Peace released a \$15,000 television advertisement buy in the Crawford area on Friday. "This ad is intended to act as a message to President Bush," Ms. Sheehan said in the advertisement, according to a press release. "All I wanted was an hour out of his extended vacation time, but he's refused to meet with me and the other military families. We just want honest answers."

Helping the cause further are volunteers from the Crawford Peace House, a worn cottage that opened in 2003 as a gathering spot for antiwar protesters who occasionally come through town.

Organizers at the house played host to a few events in the 2004 campaign, including an outdoor screening of Michael Moore's movie "Fahrenheit 9/11,"

but its driveway has never been more crowded than over the last few days. By Wednesday night, as false rumors of an altercation with the police near the Bush ranch spread, volunteers took turns answering the constantly ringing phone and stirring pots of vegetable stew to take to the demonstrators.

One woman took a call from a stranger in Portland, Ore., who had researched the name Sheehan and reported that it means "peacemaker" in the Irish language.

Another visitor came through the front door wanting to know if legal advice was needed. Volunteers streamed in and out of the house, taking handfuls of trail mix that had been set out and admiring the piles of flower bouquets sent to Ms. Sheehan in care of the antiwar group.

Back at Camp Casey, there have been moments of tension between the protesters and local residents. Neighbors have driven pick-ups through mud puddles, revved their engines and careened close to the vigil. By Friday, rumors of a counterprotest were rampant; the demonstrators braced for a reported busload of pro-war activists from Dallas. By late afternoon, they had not arrived.

But a woman from Ohio had driving two days with her 13-year-old son to see Ms. Sheehan and express her support. Jill Forsythe, 43, a computer programmer, said she made the trip from Dayton because she had, simply, "been following the story on the Internet and I just wanted Cindy to know I support her."