LARRY FLYNT ON JERRY FALWELL

TODD PLITT/AP FILE, JAN. 10, 1997

ON THE AIR: The Rev. Jerry Falwell, right, makes a point while appearing with Larry Flynt on *The Larry King Show* on CNN in 1997.

The porn king bids farewell to the preacher

BY LARRY FLYNT
Los Angeles Times Service

The first time the Rev. Jerry Falwell put his hands on me, I was stunned. Not only had we been archenemies for 15 years, his beliefs and mine traveling in different solar systems, and not only had he sued me for $50 million (a case I lost repeatedly yet eventually won in the Supreme Court), but now he was hugging me in front of millions on the Larry King show.

It was 1997. My autobiography, *An Unseemly Man*, had just been published, describing my life as a publisher of pornography. The film *The People vs. Larry Flynt* had recently come out, and the country was well aware of the battle that Falwell and I had fought: a battle that had changed the laws governing what the American public can see and hear in the media and that dramatically strengthened our right to free speech.

King was conducting the interview. It was the first time since the infamous 1988 trial that the reverend and I had been in the same room together, and the thought of even breathing the same air with him made me sick. I disagreed with Falwell (who died recently) on absolutely everything he preached, and he looked at me as symbolic of all the social ills that a society can possibly have. But I'd do anything to sell the book and the film, and Falwell would do anything to preach, so King's audience of eight million viewers was all the incentive either of us needed to bring us together.

IN THE BEGINNING

But let's start at the beginning and flash back to the late 1970s, when the battle between Falwell, the leader of the Moral Majority, and I first began. I was publishing Hustler magazine, which most people know has been pushing the envelope of taste from the very beginning, and Falwell was blasting me every chance he had. He would talk about how I was a slime dealer responsible for the decay of all morals. He called me every terrible name he could think of — names as bad, in my opinion, as any language in my magazine.

After several years of listening to him bash me and reading his insults, I decided it was time to start poking some fun at him. So we ran a parody ad in Hustler — a takeoff on the then-current Campari ads in which people were interviewed describing "their first time." In the ads, it ultimately became clear that the interviewees were describing their first time sipping Campari. But not in our parody. We had Falwell describing his "first time" as having been with his mother, "drunk off our God-fearing asses," in an outhouse.

Apparently, the reverend didn't find the joke funny. He sued us for libel in federal court in Virginia, claiming that the magazine had inflicted emotional stress on him. It was a long and tedious fight, beginning in 1983 and ending in 1988, but Hustler Magazine Inc. vs. Jerry Falwell was without question my most important battle.

We lost in our initial jury trial, and we lost again in federal appeals court. After spending a fortune, everyone's advice to me was to just settle the case and be done, but I wasn't listening; I wasn't about to pay Falwell $200,000 for hurting his feelings or, as his lawyers called it, "intentional infliction of emotional distress." We appealed to the Fourth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals; I lost for a third time.

Everyone was certain this was the end. We never thought the U.S. Supreme Court would agree to hear the case. But it did, and though I was convinced that I was going to lose, we never gave up. As we had moved up the judicial ladder, this case had become much more than just a personal battle between a pornographer and a preacher, because the First Amendment was so much at the heart of the case.

To my amazement, we won. It wasn't until after I won the case and read the justices' unanimous decision in my favor that I realized fully the significance of what had happened. The justices held that a parody of a public figure was protected under the First Amendment even if it was outrageous, even if it was "doubtless gross and repugnant," as they put it, and even if it was designed to inflict emotional distress. In a unanimous decision — written by, of all people, Chief Justice William Rehnquist — the court reasoned that if it supported Falwell's lower-court victory, no one would ever have to prove something was false and libelous to win a judgment. All anyone would have to prove is that "he upset me" or "she made me feel bad." The lawsuits would be endless, and that would be the end of free speech.

'SLEAZE MERCHANT'

Everyone was shocked at our victory — and no one more so than Falwell, who on the day of the decision called me a "sleaze merchant" hiding behind the First Amendment. Still, over time, Falwell was forced to publicly come to grips with the reality that this is America, where you can make fun of anyone you want. That hadn't been absolutely clear before our case, but now it's being taught in law schools all over the country, and our case is being hailed as one of the most important free-speech cases of the 20th century.

No wonder that when he started hugging me and smooching me on television 10 years later, I was a bit confused. I hadn't seen him since we'd been in court together, and that night I didn't see him until I came out on the stage. I was expecting (and looking for) a fight, but instead he was putting his hands all over me. I remember thinking, "I spent $3 million taking that case to the Supreme Court, and now this guy wants to put his hand on my leg?"

Soon after that episode, I was in my office in Beverly Hills, and out of nowhere my secretary buzzes me, saying, "Jerry Falwell is here to see you." I was shocked, but I said, "Send him in." We talked for two hours, with the latest issues of Hustler neatly stacked on my desk in front of him. He suggested that we go around the country debating, and I agreed. We went to colleges, debating moral issues and First Amendment issues — what's "proper," what's not and why.

TALKS AND CARDS

In the years that followed and up until his death [on May 15], he'd come to see me every time he was in California. We'd have interesting philosophical conversations. We'd exchange personal Christmas cards. He'd show me pictures of his grandchildren. I was with him in Florida once when he complained about his health and his weight, so I suggested that he go on a diet that had worked for me.

The truth is, the reverend and I had a lot in common. He was from Virginia, and I was from Kentucky. His father had been a bootlegger, and I had been one too in my 20s before I went into the Navy. We steered our conversations away from politics, but religion was within bounds. He wanted to save me and was determined to get me out of "the business."

My mother always told me that no matter how repugnant you find a person, when you meet them face to face you will always find something about them to like. The more I got to know Falwell, the more I began to see that his public portrayals were caricatures of himself.

He was definitely selling brimstone religion and would do anything to add another member to his mailing list. But in the end, I knew what he was selling, and he knew what I was selling, and we found a way to communicate.

I always kicked his ass about his crazy ideas and the things he said. Every time I'd call him, I'd get put right through, and he'd let me berate him about his views. When he was getting blasted for his ridiculous homophobic comments after he wrote his "Tinky Winky" article cautioning parents that the purple Teletubby character was in fact gay, I called him in Florida and yelled at him to "leave the Tinky Winkies alone."

When he referred to Ellen Degeneres in print as Ellen "Degenerate," I called him and said, "What are you doing? You don't need to poison the whole lake with your venom." I could hear him mumbling out of the side of his mouth, "These lesbians just drive me crazy." I'm sure I never changed his mind about anything, just as he never changed mine.

I'll never admire him for his views or his opinions. To this day, I'm not sure if his television embrace was meant to mend fences, to show himself to the public as a generous and forgiving preacher or merely to make me uneasy, but the ultimate result was one I never expected and was just as shocking a turn to me as was winning that famous Supreme Court case: We became friends.

Flynt is publisher of Hustler magazine and the author of 'Sex, Lies and Politics.'

NEW ORLEANS

'There's no other place I want to be'

• NEIGHBORHOOD, FROM 1L

the racism that has held back this city for so many years.

"We could not have achieved what we have accomplished without blacks and whites working together," Marilyn Doucette, an African-American caterer, said in her rebuilt home. "What I'll bring to the table is not necessarily what a white person will bring, and it might be vital."

To be sure, racial tensions remain, and other neighborhoods, particularly those that are poorer and mostly African American, still look as if they belong in an underdeveloped country.

The Lower Ninth Ward remains a shell of its former self. Only about 2,000 of the 14,000 residents have returned, far below the 50 percent level believed by analysts necessary to create the critical mass for recovery.

Lance Hill, executive director of the Southern Institute for Education and Research at Tulane University, blames "cultural indifference" by wealthier whites for the failure of tens of thousands of African Americans to return to New Orleans. He notes that a land-use plan called for not rebuilding low-lying neighborhoods where African Americans predominantly lived.

"The efforts — whether deliberate or not — have had the effect of locking out African Americans," Hill said.

An irony, however is that one of the neighborhoods targeted for razing in the early planning was Broadmoor. And perhaps even more ironically, that served as a catalyst to rebuild the neighborhood.

Ernie O'Steen, a retired financial analyst for General Motors, had planned to ride out Katrina as he had previous hurricanes: sitting on his raised porch, three pistols by his side, to head off trouble-makers. But authorities persuaded him to leave just before the storm. He had only a gym bag full of clothes.

When he first returned to Broadmoor two weeks after Katrina, the entire neighborhood was under several feet of water. Everyone was gone. The stench of death and decay was overpowering for O'Steen, an Air Force veteran.

"It looked like a napalm bomb had hit," he said.

O'Steen was discouraged. But when he learned that a government-sponsored planning committee called for turning Broadmoor into a flood plain, he and a handful of other returnees in January 2006 organized a rally on Napoleon Avenue, which bisects the neighborhood.

"Help Rebuild Broadmoor," read a homemade sign fashioned by O'Steen. Some 100 people showed up.

An existing group, the Broadmoor Improvement Association, revved up, led by LaToya Cantrell, a 35-year-old African American who headed a local nonprofit. The group's white leaders had decided they needed an African-American leader in a neighborhood and city that were two-thirds black.

LEE CELANO/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

IN BROADMOOR: Above, Rick Young cuts wood in a friend's house; a Mardi Gras decoration is in front.

MARK MATTERN / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Cantrell has proved to be dynamic and indefatigable for Broadmoor, even as she rebuilt her own flooded two-story home.

"We said, 'Our community will return,' " Cantrell recalled. "We will make it return. We can't wait on government. We have to do it ourselves."

Cantrell and other Broadmoor leaders sought out their neighbors — living throughout Louisiana and the rest of the South — and encouraged them to return.

Slowly but steadily they did, with each return buoying others. As their numbers grew, Cantrell and her lieutenants found a block captain for each of Broadmoor's 151 blocks. They created a web page that served as a crucial community bulletin board.

"The city is struggling and infrastructure is crumbling, but it was never a question whether Broadmoor would come back," said Oliver Thomas, a Broadmoor resident who is president of the New Orleans City Council.

Broadmoor's successes prompted Harvard, Bard College and other universities to send in dozens of students and professors to help muck out homes or provide planning advice, with funding from companies like Shell.

Today, about half of Broadmoor's residents have returned home and another 20 percent are rebuilding their homes. The neighborhood's library and elementary school have been cleaned up and are awaiting repairs.

"There are 73 neighborhoods in New Orleans, and 49 of them were flooded," said Douglas Ahlers, who heads Harvard's effort in New Orleans. "Of those 49 neighborhoods, Broadmoor is coming back the fastest."

Added Fred Palmer of Shell: "They are providing the Xs and Os of what we should focus on to make a neighborhood recover. Broadmoor is showing how academia, the corporate community and a neighborhood can work together to effectively and efficiently effect their recovery."

Dave Snyder covered the wrenching efforts to integrate New Orleans during the 1960s, as a reporter for The Times-Picayune newspaper. Now retired, he said that racial relations in Broadmoor have improved in step with the neighborhood's recovery.

"At just about every house, there's [reconstruction] going on," Snyder said, as he drove his pick-up truck through the neighborhood. Piles of rebuilding debris could be seen on nearly every block.

"Five years from now, this area will never have looked this good. Because it will all be new."

AT MIAMIHERALD.COM: Click on Today's Extras to see the Broadmoor Improvement Association web page – and to see a central clearinghouse of information on New Orleans' recovery.

LEE CELANO/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

WAITING: Vernon Cheavis Jr. by his house and a FEMA trailer in Broadmoor.