

'The Betsy Riot' launched in August

Casey: Roanoke vandalism gets high marks from new anti-gun group

An anonymous group called "The Betsy Riot," encourages anti-gun pranks and vandalism all over the country. "We are infuriated by slaughter, and by the ignorant, violent, racist, sexist, fear-mongering gun culture that enables it, and by the overly polite and deferential failed attempts to quell it. We are here to change that," they told me in an email.



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Many of you likely haven't heard about the vandalism at an office in the historic Old Southwest neighborhood on Saturday. That's because such petty crime rarely makes the news. This is an exception, however, because of the entities involved.

One is the National Rifle Association, the deep-pocketed and so-called defenders of Second Amendment rights. (Its chief executive, Wayne LaPierre, hails from Roanoke.) Another is ["The Betsy Riot,"](#) a shadowy anti-gun group of self-styled "neosuffragettes" who exist, at least, in cyberspace. Their motto is "F- — Yer Guns." They're vowing to take on the pro-gun crowd in every non-violent way possible.



The Betsy Riot | From Facebook

Vandalism painted Saturday on a retaining wall outside Roanoke lawyer Mel Williams' office on Third Street in the Old Southwest neighborhood. The photo was carried on the Facebook page of The Betsy Riot, a new anti-gun group.

Caught in the middle is the victim, Roanoke lawyer Mel Williams, who owns the property on Third Street that got defaced. He leased a spare office in his building to the NRA two weeks ago.

The NRA held an open house there Saturday. That's when someone — apparently two women — defaced a retaining wall outside. In red or pink chalk or paint, they wrote “MURDER LOBBY” in foot-tall letters. Most of that since has been scrubbed away, Williams told me.

Williams pointed me to a photo of the vandalism that made its way to [The Betsy Riot's Facebook page](#) that day, along with a mocking message that seems to approve of the action. It's been shared at least 34 times and has elicited cheers in various comments.

NRA spokesman Lars Dalseide told me Wednesday he'd never heard of The Betsy Riot; neither had I. Other than that, the NRA declined to comment. The only “news” outfit I could find that's written about them is [Guns.com](#). So I reached out to The Betsy Riot via Facebook message; that led to an email exchange.

Besides Facebook, the group has [a website](#) that promotes and encourages pranks against gun-rights supporters. The site describes those acts as “decentralized civil disobedience against gun culture.”

“We are channeling centuries of American progressivism,” the site reads. “We are neosuffragists and punk patriots and we are rescuing our country from gun culture.” The website offers pages of pre-designed graphics people can download and print on mailing labels, which can be stuck anywhere.

“Of course, you would never do anything like stick them in parks, on changing tables, in dressing rooms, or on NRA bumper stickers because that would probably be illegal and extremely naughty, you terrible girl. How could you even think such a thing?” the page reads. “Don't have a printer? Grab a marker.”

More or less, the latter is what the vandals outside Williams' office did Saturday.

“It occurred during the time period of this open house,” Williams told me. He said people at the NRA event videotaped two women believed to be responsible, and got the tag number of their vehicle, too.

At this point, no charges have been filed. “The investigation is ongoing,” said Scott Leamon, Roanoke police spokesman. “It’s my understanding that we’re working to get a copy of the video and should receive it soon.”

Williams told me he would press charges. “The feeling that you can go on someone’s property and deface it with impunity, that bugs me,” he said. He hasn’t pegged a value to the damages, noting that most of the message was removed “through some elbow grease.”

The lawyer said he frequently leases spare space in his building to lawyers and others; the NRA agreed to rent it through November’s election. Apparently, the organization is using the space as some kind of election field office, he added. Dalseide declined to elaborate.

“There are some organizations that I wouldn’t rent to, for religious or moral reasons,” Williams said. He cited the Ku Klux Klan as an example. “But the NRA is not one of them. I don’t have an objection to their support of the Second Amendment.”

The Betsy Riot certainly does.

Its website lists its modus operandi as “pranking, sneering at open-carry patriots, collecting the tears of man-babies.” In an email, the group told me it launched in August. “We prefer to remain anonymous,” they told me in a Facebook message. Its place of business? “Across the country.”

A bit of online sleuthing pegs the website’s domain registration at July 23. That was done through an Australian company called Privacy Protect Service, apparently to conceal the website owner’s identity. The first post on its Facebook timeline went up July 26 and since then, it’s been fairly active.

How many people are involved?

“We can’t give a solid number. We have had interest and input from people all around the country and it has taken off faster than we ever expected,” the group replied.

Among the “pranks” The Betsy Riot has posted about on Facebook are protests of a United Way firearms raffle in Otero County, New Mexico; signs outside a gun show in Sacramento, California; and stickers on cans of beer

in Connecticut , on some gas-station pumps in Kentucky and on products in the condom aisle of an unspecified Wal-Mart.

As far as pranks go, where does The Betsy Riot draw the line? I asked. "Violence," was the reply.

As to the question of why the group formed:

"The answer to that question is rage. We are infuriated by slaughter, and by the ignorant, violent, racist, sexist, fear-mongering gun culture that enables it, and by the overly polite and deferential failed attempts to quell it. We are here to change that."

Williams said he'd never heard of The Betsy Riot before.

"They apparently like the F-word, from what I see on their Facebook page," he observed.

One person who has heard of them is Andy Parker, the anti-gun activist from Henry County. His daughter Alison was one of two WDBJ-TV (Channel 7) journalists gunned down at Smith Mountain Lake by a handgun-toting madman a year ago.

Parker told me he's not involved with The Betsy Riot. As for what happened at Williams' office, "I enjoyed seeing what they did," he said.

"The intel I've gotten is, if you think I'm extreme, they make me look like I'm sitting idly by," Parker added. "Which is great, I think ... Without condoning it, I applaud their actions."

I could swear I heard a wink over the phone when he said that.