Idaho town stares down so-called Aryan church—and wins

At first, the community ignored the preacher's Sunday sermons promoting a “White People’s Republic” in the Northwest. Then they organized against him.

by Doug Struck in the October 25, 2017 issue

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) The church dripped with Nazi flags, swastikas, and racist war cries. It displayed a bust of Adolf Hitler. Outside, a guard tower watched over the compound set on a path marked “whites only.”

From his self-proclaimed Aryan Nations church in northern Idaho, a retired engineer named Richard Butler preached hate to his followers and served it upon the community. The town of Coeur d’Alene became code for white supremacists.

But the community came together to reject the vision of Butler’s small band and drive its adherents out. It took more than two decades, but it worked.

“We won,” said Norman Gissel, a member of the Kootenai County Task Force on Human Relations.

Gissel and others involved in that campaign are loathe to offer their strategy as a sure solution for other cities, but they say their approach might be one guide.

“There’s no community devoid of hate,” said Tony Stewart, another founder of the task force. “What we could say to any community in America is never allow the perpetrators of hate [to] come into your community and change you. Never let them be in charge.”

Butler came in 1974, bought 20 acres 11 miles outside of town, and opened his doors to the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis. He preached Sunday sermons promoting a “White People’s Republic” in the Northwest.

Most people ignored them. “In Idaho, we don’t tell you a lot about what you should do,” said Woody McEvers, now president of the city council, at his restaurant, Rustler’s Roost, where Butler and his followers often came on Sunday afternoons.

But then a Jewish restaurant was painted with ugly graffiti. A nine-year-old black girl was harassed. The group started having an annual “world congress” on its property, with rallies and marches in 1985 and 1986. A bomb blew in the backdoor of a Catholic priest who had condemned their march. He was sitting in his living room at the time.

“People did not react until there were victims,” Stewart said.

Even before that, Stewart, Gissel, and others had gathered on a February night in 1981 in the basement of a church to form the Kootenai County Task Force on Human Relations. Six neo-Nazis came also.

“They came and just walked in the back,” Stewart recalled. “They were walking back and forth. They were trying to frighten us or get us not to do anything.”

The organizers decided that when the Aryan Nations marched, the group would sponsor counterprotests at another location—as far away as Spokane, Washington—to decrease the size of the crowds. For one event, Stewart enlisted local businesses and individuals to pledge money to human rights groups for every minute of a planned Aryan Nations march and then publicly urged Butler to march slowly to raise more money for his opponents.

“They marched for 27 minutes, and we got $34,000,” Stewart said.

But others did directly confront the Aryan Nations marchers, and the Coeur d’Alene police worked hard to try to keep the groups separate.

“I was a young patrolman at the time,” Christie Wood said. “It was stressful, difficult. We had a role to keep peace, but part of that role was marching alongside these white supremacists who you didn’t even want to have to look at.”

There were arrests on both sides, but no serious injuries. “At any moment it could have gotten out of hand like it did in Charlottesville,” she said, referring to the mid-August events in Virginia in which a counterprotester was killed and dozens harmed.

It was the group’s violence that finally brought it down. In one instance in 1998, a Native American woman and her son were driving by the compound when her car backfired. The compound’s guards, imagining gunshots, chased her, firing into the vehicle and forcing it off the road, and terrorized the pair at gunpoint.

The Southern Poverty Law Center brought lawsuits against Butler and won a $6.3 million judgment in 2000. Two of his bodyguards served prison time for assault.

Butler’s compound was seized in the judgment. The fire department burned it to the ground as part of a training exercise. Townspeople cut down two trees that had swastikas carved on them and stipulated that the ground lay fallow for 20 years.

“We didn’t want anything left to show they were ever here,” Stewart said. “There was so much hate here. It needed to rest.”

The property is now an unmarked stand of pines and open field next to an alpaca farm.

Butler died in his eighties in 2004. Various adherents claimed his mantle, none to much consequence. But the task force members say their work continues. Philanthropist Greg Carr donated $1 million to create the Human Rights Education Institute, and the task force consults with communities under similar threat. It has also led a tolerance program for 32,000 fifth-graders. The schools have adopted an antibullying campaign.

But the picture of success is not unmarred. In recent years, racist leaflets have been scattered about town. A few white supremacists picketed a human rights gala ball. Food trucks owned by Hispanic businesspeople were vandalized and the owners harassed. (The task force urged everyone to eat lunch from the trucks.)

Lita Burns, a director of the Human Rights Education Institute, who is of Mexican ancestry, came to the town 16 years ago. Her eight-year-old daughter asked why people stared at them. Coeur d’Alene has changed for the better, she said, but “we don’t want to forget that history. We have to learn from the history.”

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