

CHAPTER 7

RESIST: COMBATING HATE

Billings is the largest town in the sparsely populated state of Montana. Like any other town, it has strip malls, gas stations, schools, and churches. And like a lot of other towns across the United States, Billings is a fairly homogeneous (uniform) community, where most people are of the same race. As of the most recent 2010 census, just over 90 percent of the population of Billings, Montana, is white. This percentage is just about the same as it was at the end of the twentieth century. According to census data from 1990, Billings had about eighty-one thousand residents. Of those people, only about twenty-five hundred were Latinos. About four hundred residents were black people, and about one hundred were Jews. As in any community, not everyone got along, but people treated one another with respect. It was a relatively peaceful town.

In 1986 white supremacist Richard Butler convinced a group of white supremacists called the Aryan Congress to create a “homeland” to unite white people and white hate groups across the United States. The plan was to take over five northwestern

states: Idaho, Oregon, Washington, Wyoming, and Montana. Butler chose these states because they have few minorities. He also thought law enforcement was weak in those states and that white citizens there would support his racist ideology.

Over the next few years, members of various white supremacist groups began to move to the wide-open spaces of Montana. Slowly but steadily, members of the Ku Klux Klan, the White Aryan Resistance, the Christian Patriots, and other white power groups began to move to Billings and other surrounding towns. Hate literature started to appear in Billings in 1992. The following year, people attending a Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration found KKK flyers under the windshield wipers of their cars. And the hate only increased. Later that year, the words “Nuke Israel” were spray-painted on a stop sign. Headstones at a local Jewish cemetery were pushed over. White supremacists interrupted a Sunday service at the African Methodist Episcopal Wyman Chapel to intimidate its black congregation. And the home of an interracial couple (white and American Indian) was vandalized.

It all came to a head on December 2, 1993. That day someone threw a piece of cinder block through a window at the home of Brian and Tammie Schnitzer, one of the town’s Jewish families. The window was in the bedroom of the couple’s five-year-old son Isaac, who was not there at the time. Tammie Schnitzer reported the crime to the police. To her dismay, the officer in charge advised her to take down the family’s Hanukkah decorations to avoid drawing further attention to their Jewish identity. (Hanukkah is an eight-day Jewish holiday that celebrates the rededication of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.) She told this story to a reporter from the local *Billings Gazette* newspaper. She told the reporter how troubled

she was by the officer's advice. "Maybe it's not wise to keep these symbols up," she said. "But how do you explain that to a child?"

Reading about the incident in the newspaper, residents of Billings were equally troubled, and they took action. Margaret MacDonald, a forty-two-year-old mother with two small children, worked with the minister of her church, the First Congregational Church of the United Church of Christ. They found menorahs (candelabras for Hanukkah celebrations) that members of their congregation could put in their windows to show solidarity with the Schnitzers. The *Billings Gazette* also printed a full-page picture of a menorah that readers could cut out and use. The town joined in the movement and put menorahs in their windows. Billings, as a community, united against hate.

The displays of Jewish symbols by Christian households enraged the hate groups, and they lashed out. They broke glass panes in the door of a local Methodist church that displayed the menorah pictures. They fired shots at a local Catholic school that was supporting the anti-hate campaign. They kicked out the windows of six cars parked in front of houses displaying menorahs.

The homeowners received anonymous phone calls saying, "Go look at your car, Jew-lover." With every act of violence and intimidation, the anti-hate movement grew. What started with a few dozen supportive



The townspeople of Billings, Montana, placed menorahs in their windows to show solidarity with the victims of a targeted attack against a Jewish family during the Hanukkah season in 1993. The residents' message was clear: not in our town.

citizens expanded into a display of more than six thousand pictures of menorahs.

MacDonald later reflected on the response: “All along, our coalition had been saying an attack on one of us is an attack on all of us. And God bless them, the people of this town understood.” The residents of Billings stood up to every act of vandalism and violence. It took several months, but eventually the Klan and the skinheads and all the other white supremacists grew quiet. The vandalism stopped, the hate-filled flyers disappeared, and the anonymous phone calls ended.

LEAVING A HATE GROUP

Many hate group members choose to leave their groups and, in some cases, abandon hatred and prejudice. Leaving a hate group is a difficult decision. Often some major event triggers it, such as having a fight with the group leader or watching a close friend in the organization get arrested or hurt. Some people who leave hate groups do so because they change and no longer hold the same biases and prejudices. Others who leave hate groups hold on to their prejudices but tire of the violence and danger that is a part of being an active member of a hate group. Still other hate group members grow away from the organization as their lives change. For example, many ex-members have said that getting married and having children changed their perspective. They don't have the same amount of time to devote to the group or don't want to risk the safety of their loved ones.

However, outsiders can rarely force a member to leave. Tony McAleer, former white supremacist and cofounder of Life After Hate, says that for devoted hate group members “ideology and identity have become the same. When you challenge ideology, you're challenging [a person's sense of self]. It's not so much changing their minds, it's [changing] their hearts.” Usually the decision to leave a hate group comes from the member. And it is a tough journey, even if an individual is committed to it.



Former Ku Klux Klansman Shane Johnson followed in his family's tradition by joining the Klan. Leaving the group was difficult. To move forward, Johnson focused on his new family and the support of Life After Hate.

Most groups don't make it easy for members to leave. Departing members are likely to face resistance from group leaders and other members. That resistance may be significant—and may even put the person at risk of physical harm. Shane Johnson joined a rural chapter of the Ku Klux Klan in northern Indiana when he was fourteen. Joining the Klan was a family tradition. Johnson's father and many of his father's relatives were KKK members. "We were known as a Klan family," he said years later.

Johnson was an active Klan member for about six years. He had a drinking problem, and when he was in his early twenties, he was arrested for a drunken fight in a nearby town. Following the arrest, he stopped drinking and decided to drop out of the Klan. Speaking of the reaction of other Klan members and his own family, he says, "When I dropped out, they beat the holy hell out of me."

Johnson found support from the group Life After Hate. Founded and run by Christian Picciolini and other former hate group members,

the organization is one of many that helps people like Johnson leave hate groups. The Free Radicals Project, also founded and led by Christian Picciolini, is a similar group. It works with individuals and their families to pull away safely from hate groups and their extremist ideologies. In Johnson's case, he also found help and support from a woman named Tiffany Gregoire, who helped him question the reasons for his hate-filled belief system and reevaluate the world. He realized that he needed to take personal responsibility for his own problems. Although he still receives threats from Klansmen, Johnson and Gregoire are now focused on their family and raising their son.

Belonging to a hate group is an intense, all-consuming experience. Leaving a hate group can be just as intense. As former neo-Nazi Angela King tells it, the change encompasses every aspect of your life from the mental to the physical. "People in extremist groups wrap their entire identities around it. Everything in their life has to be changed, from the way they think, to the people they associate with, to dealing with permanent tattoos," King says. An individual leaving a group has to change his or her whole life. Some people compare it to belonging to a cult or to living with an addiction. In the same way that support groups are important to people who want to leave a cult or kick an addiction, they are also vital for helping people leave hate groups. Anti-hate group organizations, church groups, community service groups, and groups of supportive family and friends run support groups for former hate group members. The support groups help former members make changes to their lifestyles.

Changes in any behavior are difficult to make. For people in hate groups, it is especially challenging to overcome prejudice. Experts know, for example, that a person doesn't just stop hating from one day to the next. And because hatred lingers, the person trying to leave the hate group is at risk for some time of returning to it. Peter Simi has interviewed many former hate group members. He has found that "a lot of them talk about being addicted to hate." Persistence is key to

staying out of hate organizations once a member has left.

Picciolini says that support, understanding, and compassion are powerful tools to offer someone who wants to leave a hate group. He says that “all of us who left [a hate group] received compassion from the people we least deserved it from when we least deserved it. It’s the [acceptance] of the people we hated when we don’t deserve it that helps people get out.”

Connecting with someone from a once-hated group is an important part of healing. Sociologist Michael Kimmel notes that many former hate group members had “met a member of the despised group, one . . . individual whose very existence eroded all their categorical group stereotypes, [and] they began to unlearn the dehumanization the movement had taught them.”

Frank Meeink, a former neo-Nazi who went to prison for kidnapping a rival skinhead, began to move away from his hate group because he wanted to have a chance to see his young daughter—something he knew he couldn’t do if he returned to prison. However, he did not begin to change his opinions until Keith Brookstein, who is Jewish, hired the swastika-tattooed neo-Nazi to move antique furniture around his business. Brookstein told Meeink that he didn’t care if he was a neo-Nazi, as long as he didn’t damage the furniture. Meeink spent many hours working and talking with Brookstein. His views about Jews slowly evolved. A big moment came when Meeink broke a piece of furniture. He told Brookstein about it, thinking he’d be fired. Instead, Brookstein told Meeink that he was a smart asset to the company and that he still had a job. “I was walking home that day,” Meeink said, “and I was just like, ‘You know what? I can’t keep claiming I’m a neo-Nazi. I couldn’t kill Keith. I would f**king probably take a bullet for Keith now,’ and so I started to change.”

Hate members leaving their group must also deal with the potential for physical harm from the group itself. Established anti-hate organizations can help with advice for the best approaches to cutting

STUDENTS RESPOND TO HATE

Incidents of hate-inspired vandalism surged, including in schools, following the election of Trump as president of the United States. On November 16, 2016, students at Attleboro High School (AHS) in Attleboro, Massachusetts, found racist graffiti scrawled in the third-floor boys' restroom. The graffiti said "Go Donald Trump," as well as "KKK will handle all n****rs."

The school removed the offending comments, and one month later, students responded by countering the hate with kindness. More than sixty volunteers handwrote "love notes" to each of the high school's seventeen hundred students and staff members. The notes, written on index cards, expressed the students' heartfelt appreciation and respect for their fellow students. The cards were on their desks when they arrived at school first thing in the morning.

"The message is to bring the community together and show we are supportive and care about everyone," said senior Iffa Sugrio.

Fellow student Dylan Ilkowitz agreed, saying, "Our goal is to make every student feel that AHS is an inclusive environment and that our school did not stand for racist and prejudiced values."

No further incidents of graffiti have been reported.

all ties with an organization. This might involve changing a phone number and getting a new mailing address to prevent the group from contacting them. Depending on the financial circumstances of the individual leaving the group and the level of physical danger they may face, an anti-hate organization might recommend moving to a new home. Cutting off all means of contact from the old hate group will help a member move forward safely and effectively. It may also be a good idea to hire a lawyer familiar with hate-related issues. A lawyer can make sure that all legal ties to the organization are cut off.

STANDING UP TO HATE GROUPS

If a hate group enters or becomes active in your community, what can you do about it? The solution isn't always simple or easy, but it always starts with one thing: resistance.

Resistance was the backbone of the anti-hate group movement in Billings, Montana. In 2018 Sarah Anthony, former chair of the Billings Coalition for Human Rights, reflected on what Billings had done in the mid-1990s to combat hate:

Come up with a plan. Make a few phone calls. Put up menorahs. That's all we did. Pretty simple stuff, actually. But you have to build the sentiment, to forge the real feeling that goes deep. We did something right here, and we will do it again if we have to. If we don't, there are people who would break every window in Billings, and we would look out those windows and see ourselves.

Experts point out that when hate rears its head, a community cannot ignore it and hope it will go away. Apathy and avoidance allow hate to take root and grow. It has to be confronted head-on.

The Anti-Defamation League and Southern Poverty Law Center are excellent resources that provide a starting point for what you can do to combat hate. The Southern Poverty Law Center offers a community response guide that outlines ten ways to fight hate groups. The steps are

1. Act.
2. Join forces.
3. Support the victims.
4. Speak up.
5. Educate yourself.
6. Create an alternative.
7. Pressure leaders.
8. Stay engaged.
9. Teach acceptance.
10. Dig deeper.

Following these guidelines, the first thing to do is to report any experience of hate speech or hate crime. Pick up the phone, and call your local authorities. If you don't feel safe doing that, tell a trusted

adult, such as a neighbor or family member, counselor, or a leader in your church, synagogue, or mosque. If the hate is happening at your school, tell your school principal, counselor, or school resource officer. Post about it on social media. Contact your friends and family. Organize a neighborhood or community meeting. Reach out to the Anti-Defamation League or the Southern Poverty Law Center. Do something to combat the hate you see.

Next, get involved in fixing the damage the hate group caused. Volunteer to repair acts of vandalism. Paint over offensive graffiti. Make sure victims are taken care of. Often hate crimes don't target specific individuals. They target an entire group or community. So if hate members vandalize a mosque or a synagogue, everyone in the community suffers. In Madison, Wisconsin, in 2017, for example, a small local synagogue was the victim of a hate crime. Less than twenty-four hours before the start of the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah, red swastikas and the words "Trump Rules" and "Antifa Sucks" were found



City worker Cal Steinberg removed spray-painted hate symbols on a marker outside a historic synagogue in Madison, Wisconsin, shortly after they were discovered in the fall of 2017.

CONFRONTING HATE AND STAYING SAFE

Hate groups are persistent and often violent. Resistance typically increases the levels of threats and violence. The groups often target leaders of the resistance for specific verbal and physical attacks. This is especially true when the resistance is led by members of a minority group targeted by the hate group. So hate groups or members of those groups should not be confronted directly. Confrontation can escalate quickly into violence, and violence won't change minds. Former neo-Nazi Frank Meeink recalls his reaction when he was showered with rocks and bottles while marching in a KKK parade: "I never once ducked a bottle and thought 'Woah, I better rethink my belief system here.' Instead, it was, 'Now I'm angry. Now I have an enemy I can see.'"

It is better to react in peace to the actual or implied violence of hate groups. Take the high ground and stand it. You don't have to prove how strong you are by engaging in violence of your own. Showing strength through peace is not only safer but also more effective.

spray-painted on a memorial next to the synagogue. Park officials removed the offensive content before the beginning of Rosh Hashanah services began, and the rest of the community sprang into action. In response, the community placed flowers at the site, and students at the University of Wisconsin–Madison campus, along with city leaders, denounced the vandalism.

Like the Madison residents, do whatever you can to make a stand against hate. Remember, you aren't alone. In fact, facing a hate group alone may be dangerous, so work with friends and neighbors to stand up to a hate group. Work together to repair your community and support the victims of hate. Organize a rally at your school or participate in one in your community. Large groups and the power of people can be very effective in driving out hate.

Other ideas include making and distributing flyers and posters that promote a message of tolerance and peace. Work with friends, local

religious congregations, community groups, and other organizations. Write letters to the online editors of local papers, contact your local TV and radio stations, and spread your message on social media. The stronger and the more consistent the public pressure for a hate group to stop its actions, the more likely it is the group will stop.

TAKING LEGAL ACTION

First Amendment rights legally protect many kinds of hate group activity. But some things that hate groups do are illegal. For example, damaging or defacing property is against the law, whether it's breaking a window, painting offensive graffiti on a wall, or burning down a garage. Physical attacks are also against the law. If one or more members of a hate group physically attack someone, the attack is illegal. Vandalism, graffiti, and physical attacks should all be reported to authorities by calling 9-1-1. Even small things should be reported. Reporting a hate group for something small may stop something more violent from happening in the future.

Sometimes, if the hate does not stop and the crimes are especially offensive, community leaders and other individuals may choose to report local hate groups to a national organization, such as the Southern Poverty Law Center or the Anti-Defamation League. These organizations use their legal teams to go after hate groups to break them up.

Heidi Beirich, leader of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project, has filed lawsuits against multiple branches of hate groups. In 2016 she commented about the project's success at breaking up KKK groups through financial methods. "We came up with this idea that we should sue these folks in civil court [a court that handles legal disputes that are not crimes] to bankrupt them," she says. When a group loses a civil suit, the penalty is usually a very high fine. If it is high enough, it can put a business or organization out of business. The Intelligence Project has successfully stopped a series of Klan groups that

"IT'S HARD TO HATE SOMEBODY YOU KNOW"

In 2013 fourteen-year-old Ziad Ahmed, a Bangladeshi American Muslim from Princeton, New Jersey, created a website called *redefy* (www.redefy.org). The site provides a space for people to share their experiences dealing with hate and prejudices. He wants his peers to know that it's not acceptable to put other people down because of their race, views, or religion.

Ziad was inspired by his experience as a Muslim in post-9/11 America. "From a young age, I knew I was different because of my faith," he said. "I remember one time in sixth grade, someone asked me if Islam meant that I worshipped a monkey god, as a joke, and I remember being so upset." By encouraging visitors to his site to share their personal stories, Ziad hopes to educate others and spread tolerance. As he says, "It's hard to hate somebody you know . . . just because people have different sexual orientation, different skin color, different gender, it doesn't make someone less or different."

they have sued. One suit resulted in a \$2.5 million judgment against the Imperial Klans of America, the second-largest KKK group in the United States, based in Dawson Springs, Kentucky. Although the Imperial Klans of America is still operational, the organization is now much smaller. Beirich goes on to explain, "When these groups don't have money, that means there's less violence that they could perpetrate. The whole idea is to not allow them to function."

LOVE VS. HATE: TEACHING TOLERANCE

Defeating one hate group does not defeat them all. Experts with the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Anti-Defamation League say that it is a constant struggle to fight the growing number of hate groups in the United States. To effectively combat hate groups, hate speech, and hate crimes, society must ultimately deal with the underlying issues that lead to the spread of hate.

Sociologists and other experts have studied prejudice, and they

know that it is learned early in life. For children who hear racist, homophobic, misogynist (anti-woman), anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, or otherwise intolerant language—on television, on the internet, and from friends and family—chances are higher that the child will grow up with the same prejudices. Researchers have found that by the age of three or four, children of one race show preference for other children of the same race. Gender stereotypes are established in children by the time they turn ten. For the cycle of prejudice to end, children must learn tolerance and acceptance—in daycares, in schools, in community organizations, and through the media.

Many schools are adopting antibias education curricula. Antibias education involves exposing students to people of different races, nationalities, and religions. It encourages young people to look at others and admire their uniqueness and their sameness. It's all about learning how not to be prejudiced against others. One of the best ways



In August 2018, white supremacists across the United States gathered to mark the anniversary of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. In Washington, DC, their numbers were dwarfed by hundreds of thousands of counterprotesters (above) united against hate and prejudice.

to learn to be accepting of others is to get to know them. Many whites who are prejudiced against blacks have never gotten to know a black person. Similarly, many people who hate LGBTQI peoples have never knowingly hung out with someone who is gay or transgender. Research shows that when a person meets and gets to know something about someone who is different from them, they gain a better understanding of the other person. They begin to rethink existing prejudices. The more we meet, work, study, play, and socialize with people who do not share our same experiences and backgrounds, the more likely we are to accept differences and build on similarities.

The bottom line is that hate lessens when we learn about and practice tolerance with our fellow human beings. Prejudice leads to hate. Love leads to the tolerance and acceptance that makes any society strong and enduring. The best and most effective way to defeat hate is by practicing and performing acts of love and compassion.