

EDUCATION & VIGILANCE NETWORK

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The following is a copy of the written and oral testimony that Floyd Cochran - Director of Education & Vigilance Network, gave to the Pennsylvania House Judiciary Committee on Hate Group activity in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Testimony was given November 21, 1996 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

My name is Floyd Cochran, today I sit before you as a member of the human race and a citizen of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 4 years ago I would have sat here before you as a believer in the false doctrines of the master race and a officer in the hate group known as Aryan Nations. From 1990 to 1992 I was a youth recruiter and spokesman for one of the most violent hate groups in the United States - the Church of Jesus Christ Christian/Aryan Nations. While I cannot change the things of the past, I stand today before you and the people of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and apologize and take responsibility for those beliefs and actions.

Here in Pennsylvania when most people think of organized hate, one conjures up images of blazing crosses, hooded men in sheets, people who can't say three or four words without referring to a dictionary, and it is always somewhere else. Maybe that was the racist movement of the 60s and 70s but today in the 1990s the organized racist movement is made up of people who are both intelligent and motivated. No longer are they limited only to the back alleys and cornfields of Pennsylvania. Instead, they are on the Internet, producing cable-access videos; and most insidious of all, the organized racist movement of the 1990s is actively recruiting our young people with alarming results. As we saw in the video a few moments ago, the Pennsylvania-based racist movement is drawing its strength not only from 30 -year-old white males, but also from young white males and females aged 10 and older. The organized racist movement of the 1990s is a mirror image of society, wherever Aryan Nation sent me, I met and worked with educated bigots, uneducated bigots, bigots from broken homes, and bigots from the upper middle-class.

A colony of bigots have descended upon Pennsylvania. They use so-called political and social wedge issues such as gun control, affirmative action, abortion, taxes, and homophobia as a way of attracting attention and to legitimize their hate. This colony of bigots stretches across the Commonwealth. Extending west from Harrisburg to Pittsburgh, it is primarily the various Klans and racist skinheads; north from route 80 to the New York border, it would be the Christian Identity groups and militias; east of Harrisburg to Philadelphia and up to Scranton and Stroudsburg, it is Christian Identify, skinheads, and neo-nazi gangs which comprise the racist movement. But whatever their background, whatever racist group that the individual may belong to, race is the unifier and violence is their weapon.

I hold here in my hand an article dated November 6, 1996 from the Potter County Leader Enterprise. On the front page is a news article concerning August Kreis, Potter Countys' local Aryan Nation racist leader. Kreis is quoted as saying "Potter County, PA" we love it ! "It will become to us as the east coast version of northern Idaho! And there's nothing you can do about it". In the late 1970s Aryan Nation moved into the Idaho panhandle and for the first couple of years they kept a low profile. During this time they were busy building their buildings and putting together an infrastructure. Then, beginning in the early 1980s and continuing to the present, Aryan Nation and Aryan Nation followers left the compound in northern Idaho and went on a racist crime spree. Organized racists have been arrested, and in most cases convicted, of committing the following crimes.

Bombing of a synagogue in Idaho - 1983

The murder of Alan Berg, Jewish talk-show host in Denver, Colorado - 1984

Armored car robbery in California - 1984

Bombing of the home of a Catholic Priest in Idaho - 1986

Attempted bombings of gay and lesbian establishments in Washington - 1990

Shoot-out with law enforcement officers, leaving 3 dead in Idaho - 1992
Bombing of a newspaper stand and Planned Parenthood in Washington - 1996

Numerous other petty crimes have been committed throughout the years by white supremacists who moved into the area due to the fact that Aryan Nation has designated northern Idaho as one of the Aryan homelands here in America. I know, because I once lived and worked there.

Is this what August Kreis and his nazi compound is planning for Pennsylvania ?

The organized racist movement has and is evolving and changing. Probably the greatest single change of the organized racist right-wing has been the development of the Christian Identity religion. Numbering in the hundreds just 30 years ago, today Christian Identity includes several thousand believers. Christian Identity is fast becoming one of the foundations that make up the organized racist movement of the 1990s, unifying Klansmen, neo-nazis and those seeking a higher justification for their hate. As a former believer of the Christian Identity faith, I know from personal experience the seductive power of Identity. I also saw how palatable and convincing the ideology of racial hatred can become when taught in the name of God. And therein lies part of the problem. Both the extreme religious right-wing and the hard-core believers of Christian Identity, use God as a tool to justify hatred and intolerance of those different from themselves. Speaking from personal experience, if I could believe that my personal hatreds had a spiritual foundation, it gave credibility and meaning to what I was doing and thinking. It gave me a religious compass, so to speak.

Christian Identity is a faith that commands its followers to separate and engage in armed conflicts with those it has deemed as "anti-Christ," such as Jews and people of color. It is a faith that imbues the believer with a sense of divine blessing and guidance for their hate. This faith comes complete with pageantry and rituals, dietary laws, and the belief that Hitler was a godly man.

The Christian Identity enclave located near Allentown, Pennsylvania is experiencing a state of growth. They conduct church services on Sundays, print a racist newsletter; they have increased recruitment efforts and have built a firing range. These developments indicate that there is trouble ahead. This racist gang is led by self-professed "Pastor" Mark Thomas. Thomas is the Aryan Nation's Ambassador to Pennsylvania and a former chaplain in the Ku Klux Klan. Thomas and his followers are waiting only for a command from God, to engage in criminal violent racist acts, although the restlessness of his more militant parishioners may come first. Thomas doesn't directly tell people to go out and commit crimes. Instead, he tells them that God sanctions crime and violence. On the Internet, Thomas teaches that it is biblical, and therefore OK, to burn churches, knowing full well that someone reading his sermons will act. By providing a place to rally and meet, Thomas has catapulted himself and Pennsylvania into the forefront of racist activity in the United States. * See Attachment, Klanwatch - November 1996 - Profile of Mark Thomas - Page 10

Racist activity that has already produced some deadly results:

Summer of 1993 - August Kreis in Potter County, PA. holds Aryan Rock Fest, over 250 racist skinheads and other assorted bigots gather for a music fest.

October 1994, Thomas' sermons were attended by skinheads, Bryan and David Freeman.

February 1995, Bryan and David Freeman murdered their parents and younger brother.

February - 1995 - Racist skinheads desecrate a synagogue in York, Pennsylvania with a pig's head.

In March of 1995 - Mark Thomas' friend and fellow-traveler in hate, Tom Blair, was appointed to a local school board committee. Blair is the editor of the racist paper "The Jubilee".

October 1995 - 100 attend racist rally at Thomas' encampment. White Aryan Resistance organizer, Dennis Mahon was a featured speaker. Mahon is a former Klan leader and is an organizer for California skinhead leader, Tom Metzger.

December 1995 - Pvt. James Burmeister of Thompson, PA was arrested for the killing of two African - Americans. Burmeister, along with two other Fort Bragg, North Carolina soldiers were reported to have been members of a racist skinhead gang which operated on the military base. Police found bomb making manuals, neo-nazi flags, and white supremacist literature in Burmeisters' rented trailer.

May 1996 -FBI arrests members of the Aryan Republican Army, a nazi criminal gang that robbed 22 banks in seven states. One of the robbers, Richard Gurthie, admitted to giving over \$250,000 to Aryan Nation and other white supremacist groups. This four-man cell allegedly came together under the "pastoral guidance" of Christian Identity leader, Mark Thomas.

November, 1996 - A Captain in the Allentown City Police Department is reported to have Nazi memorabilia in his office, which included a bust of Adolph Hitler.

And finally from January 1, 1996 to June 30, 1996, the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission has reported that there has been 19 rallies and events sponsored by the various Pennsylvania Ku Klux Klan; rallies which have been held in such places as the Punxsutawney, PA., school gym and on the Hollidaysburg, PA., courthouse steps.

Often I am asked what caused me to become a racist. Racism is a learned behavior. Like many in the racist movement, I didn't wake up one day and say, "Oh, I can't join the chess club, so I guess I'll join the Klan. It was a natural progression from the bigotry I learned from the society I lived in. I grew up in an all-white farming community in upstate New York. The first thing I learned to hate was New York City. The examples, presented to me, of people on welfare or those who committed crimes, were always black. Listening to my parents and teachers I heard that there were " good colored people and bad colored people. Never once, that I can recall, was I taught that there were just good people and bad people. I was predisposed to labeling and stereotyping. I learned the basics of racism and hatred at an early age.

What I didn't learn, was that the hate would turn on me. My youngest son was born with a cleft palate. When the Aryans found this out, I was told that he would have to be killed because he was genetically defective. As a father, I would not let someone hurt my son. At that moment a light went on - I could not reconcile how on one hand it was wrong to want to kill my son, who had harmed no one, but at the same time it was all right for me to feel and think the same about people who were born different then myself.

In as much as I didn't learn to hate overnight , I didn't stop hating overnight. It has been over four years since I left behind the doctrines of hate and racial bigotry. I have come a long way and I have a long way to go. I have been able to make this change through challenging myself and through reaching out to people.

For me the answer has been to reach out and educate myself about differences and diversity. To learn to respect others, after so many years of hate, is not easy. And likewise for the citizens of Pennsylvania, to admit that racism and bigotry is alive and well is never easy. What we must do is first admit that the bigots are among us and that they are committed to implementing their ideologies of racism and bigotry. We must take immediate and decisive action. I recommend:

Passage of an Anti - Masking Law * see attachment "Unmasking the Klan"
Strengthening the existing Anti - Intimidation Laws.

Give public and immediate support to anyone or any community that has been victimized by hate groups and hate crimes.

Add Sexual Orientation to the current Anti - Intimidation Law, as Pennsylvania leads the nation in the commission of violent crimes against gays and lesbians.

Encourage mainstream elected officials and religious leaders to take a strong stand against bigotry.

Incorporate an honest discussion of the history of bigotry and racism into the school curriculum.

Support your local grassroots unity coalitions.

Support the Education & Vigilance Network, a Pennsylvania-based organization that is made up of individuals and human rights organizations, working to combat the message of hate and hate groups.

Change is challenging. It is not something that is accomplished overnight. Challenging and questioning old fears and stereotypes never ends.... for all of us.

Floyd Cochran - Director of the Education & Vigilance Network

Date : November 21, 1996

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