

UNMASKING THE HATE :

Today we will hear testimony not only on the unmasking law but also on hate groups and racist gangs. We will hear how the racist movement has propelled Pennsylvania into a leader of hate. Today we will hear that more often than not that hate is being spread under the mask of the Ku Klux Klan.

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.

Public rallies, marches, burning crosses, hooded men and women shouting racial epithets and threats, acts of violence and intimidation, Georgia of the nineteen-sixties?

NO PENNSYLVANIA OF THE 1990'S

No one can deny that the face of organized racism and bigotry is growing here in the Commonwealth. More often than not that face is covered by the mask and hoods of the Ku Klux Klan. Here in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, it is becoming fashionable to use public tax payers property, such as the courthouse and school gym, to spread one's hatred and bigotry and best of all you can hide your face behind a mask. This past June 1996, about 40 masked and hooded members of the Ku Klux Klan occupied the steps of the Blair County Courthouse. Sounding like school yard bullies who can't get their way, the Klan threatened violence.

Steve Bowers, a Klan leader from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, stated " If we [Klan] can't take back this country by peaceful means, we will take it back by force." Contrary to what Mr. Bowers would like to think, the Ku Klux Klan never had the country in the first place. But what history does show is that the Ku Klux Klan lives up to its threats of violence and intimidation. More often than not, the first step to violence by the Klan is their ability to put on a mask and a hood and intimidate people. By being masked and hooded the Pennsylvania Klans are able to accomplish one of their goals: intimidate and terrorize the people of Pennsylvania.

If we are to ever get serious about confronting bigotry and hate groups, we must first strip away the mask of hate. The mask of racism and bigotry that dwells in each of us and the physical mask that the Ku Klux Klan wears. One of the greatest strengths of organized hate groups such as the Klan is their ability to intimidate people. They intimidate people not only through acts of violence but also through their rhetoric and the hoods that hide their face of hate.

For almost one hundred years in Georgia, the Klan committed acts of violence and terror. In 1951 the State of Georgia passed an anti-masking law which made it illegal for anyone to wear a mask on public property with the intent to intimidate someone. In 1990, the Georgia Supreme Court upheld the 1951 anti - masking law as constitutional. Georgia Supreme Court Chief Justice Harold Clarke noted that "a nameless, faceless figure strike terror in the human heart. But remove the mask, and the nightmarish form is reduced to its true dimensions. The face betrays not only identity but also human frailty."

The Education & Vigilance Network believes that the wearing of a mask to spread the message of hate at public taxpayers expense on public property is not guaranteed under the constitution. If wearing a mask or a hood is equated with freedom of speech, then that hood or mask has to be viewed as fighting words or shouting fire in a

movie theater. Is it no less of a crime when the Klan can put on a mask with the intent to intimidate and rob Pennsylvanians of their dignity ?

The Education & Vigilance Network further believes that when using the public arena to advance one's views, whatever those views and beliefs may be, the community has a right to see the actual face, and not a hood.

The anti - masking statutes have been crafted as not to interfere with secular and religious holidays such as Halloween, Easter and so forth.

The proposed legislation reads like this:

WEARING MASK, HOOD, OR DEVICE WHICH CONCEALS IDENTITY OF WEARER.

(A) A person is guilty of a misdemeanor when he/she wears a mask, hood or device by which any portion of the face is so hidden, concealed, or covered as to conceal the identity of the wearer and is upon any public way or public property or upon the private property of another without the written permission of the owner or occupier of the property to do So.

(B) This section shall not apply to:

(1) A person wearing a traditional holiday costume on the occasion of the holiday;

(2) A person lawfully engaged in trade and employment or in a sporting activity where a mask is worn for the purpose of ensuring the physical safety of the wearer, or because of the nature of the occupation, trade, or profession, or sporting activity;

(3) A person using a mask in a theatrical production including use in Mardi Gras celebrations and masquerade balls.

(4) A person wearing gas mask prescribed in emergency management drills and exercises or emergencies.

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. And also learned to hide them behind a mask and hood.

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 than 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 information and resource center 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.

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