

Choosing Social Justice over Hate Two Stories of Community Success in the Pacific Northwest

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In February of 2010, one of the authors of this article (Norm Gissel), a board member and attorney for the Kootenai County Task Force on Human Relations, received a phone call from Scotta Callister, editor of the *Blue Mountain Eagle* newspaper, published in John Day, Oregon. Callister was seeking advice on how to discourage a neo-Nazi group from moving to Grant County. She also wanted information about Paul Mullet, a member of the unit. Mullet was a recent transplant from Ohio to northern Idaho. Callister initiated the inquiry after Mullet visited the *Blue Mountain Eagle* in early February and announced his intention to purchase property and establish a new Aryan Nations' headquarters and compound. After visiting with Gissel, Callister made two crucial editorial decisions: She elected to interview Mullet and she accompanied her article with a photo of Mullet dressed in his neo-Nazi uniform. The combination of the offensive uniform and the serious content of the story outraged local residents. Callister's decision to inform the public with both an article and a photo set the stage for a course of events that would eventually lead to a defeat of Mullet's plans to move to Grant County.

The Kootenai County Task Force on Human Relations was established in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, in February 1981 as a volunteer human rights group dedicated to opposing a terrorist hate group called the Aryan Nations. Under the leadership of Richard Butler, the confrontational organization had moved to northern Idaho from southern California in 1973. Through an annual Aryan Nations' World Congress, Butler quickly found allies with like-minded radical factions including the Ku Klux Klan, the Order, and Order II. Coeur d'Alene and nearby communities in the Inland Northwest soon faced threats from the activities of these militant

groups, which included the mass distribution of hate literature, malicious harassment and intimidation of racial and other minorities, bank robberies, bombings, and murder.

Through its denunciation of discriminatory acts and advocacy for hate crime victims, the task force became known throughout the region as a watchdog to counter the presence of the Aryan Nations and their associates. The dangers faced by task force members in their efforts to curb hate crimes was demonstrated when the home of task force president and Catholic priest Bill Wassmuth was bombed in 1986. Several days later, more threatening explosives were detonated in downtown Coeur d'Alene. As a result, the task force developed a close working relationship with law enforcement and prosecutors while serving as an ally and representative to victims of hate acts and crimes.

National, regional, and local media initiated contacts with task force leaders for comments and advice when aggressive incidents against minorities occurred. The workload and limited resources of the task force were stretched as communities and organizations across the country recognized its growing experience and expertise. Nevertheless, the task force remained active in fulfilling its original mission. As the organization matured, the mission expanded. The task force began consulting with other communities throughout the Inland Northwest and the nation, suggesting the creation of similar grassroots organizations to oppose hate. Task force leaders traveled or consulted with individuals, groups, the media, educators, and governmental officials in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Wyoming, New York, Alaska, Washington, North Carolina, Florida, Wisconsin, Oregon, California, Montana, Utah, Iowa, and Nevada. The task force also broadened its work to assist individuals and groups subject to job, housing, and public accommodation discrimination based on race, color, ethnic origin, religion,

The authors wish to express special thanks to Kathy Canfield Davis, PhD, from the University of Idaho for her invaluable consulting research advice throughout this research project.

creed, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, or social and economic status.

Involvement of the task force in addressing discrimination cases begins with a member contacting the entity alleged to have discriminated against the individual(s). If this avenue is unsuccessful and the case appears to have merit, the victim is referred to the appropriate government agency for possible relief. A final solution may involve contacting the media to inform the public of the issue. More recently, the task force has responded to inquiries from educators, college students, and a variety of television and radio program producers from Canada, Japan, Ireland, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden, Italy, France, and the Asian desk of the Voice of America. In addition to learning more about the work of the task force, these inquiries also sought information about the ideology and activities of hate groups, including labeling some of these groups as domestic terrorist organizations.

Grant County, Oregon

After the initial phone call from the newspaper editor, we—the authors Norm Gissel and Tony Stewart and Diana Gissel—were invited to John Day, Oregon, for a series of events beginning Friday, February 26, 2010. Prior to our visit, and following a long-standing policy, we held several briefings with local leaders to learn more about the demographics, culture, social climate, and unique features of Grant County and its citizens. (In order to establish trust with a new community, it helps to understand the values, norms, and lifestyles of its residents.) As it turned out, the demographics and political makeup of Grant County are not very different from those of Kootenai County, Idaho. One of several exceptions is the population in Grant County is approximately 7,500 compared to 138,000 people in Kootenai. About 95 percent of Grant County's population is counted as non-Hispanic white in the 2010 U.S. Census; Kootenai County in 2010 was 89.1 percent non-Hispanic white. Grant County is politically conservative as demonstrated by the 2004 and 2008 presidential election results. George W. Bush received 78.9 percent of the vote in 2004, and Senator John McCain won 71.25 percent in 2008. The economy is supported primarily by logging, ranching, and tourism. Recent national economic

conditions have had a severe impact on the county's economy.

Like other rural regions, the county is struggling with loss of jobs. In addition, the landscape is isolated by a series of mountain ranges. The nearest population centers include the cities of Pendleton, Oregon, and Boise, Idaho. It is a county with miles of rivers, making it a destination for outdoor recreational activities. For Mullet, the isolation made it an attractive location to establish a stronghold. Many experts might suggest that the political, economic, and social structures could make this community ripe for Mullet's extreme neo-Nazi beliefs. But what happened on February 26, 2010, in Grant County laid to rest once and for all the fallacy of that theory with regard to this community and its people.

The *Blue Mountain Eagle* provided extensive coverage of both Mullet's promise to move to Grant County and the preparations for the upcoming rallies and events to oppose Mullet's move. The local news stories soon gained regional and national attention by the media as well as by Oregon's political leaders. The extent of the interest in this story became clear on Thursday afternoon as teams of reporters begin filling most of the motel rooms in John Day to cover the next day's events.

We arrived in John Day and met with the *Blue Mountain Eagle* staff to review the next day's human rights celebrations. It was clear that Callister and the newspaper's publisher, Marissa Williams, had given much thought and time in the planning a full day of activities. The itinerary included two public unity rallies, one in the morning and one in the evening; a press conference with the large contingency of the national media; a private strategy meeting with twenty community and civic leaders; and a public demonstration by the residents to promote human rights.

Both rallies attracted overflow crowds committed to discouraging Mullet's attempt to establish a white supremacy group in the county, and three themes emerged: First, community members wanted to know effective peaceful strategies to oppose the hate group's move. Second, they wanted suggestions on how they could be more proactive to advance

freedom, equality, and justice in their community. Finally, many affirmed their affection for and bonds to the community. For example, during the morning rally, one African American resident shared her personal story of discrimination as a young person while living in a southern state. She expressed appreciation for the support given to her by the residents in Grant County. At the evening rally, a local physician expressed gratitude for the manner in which the community had embraced his adopted Ethiopian child. At the close of each rally, audience members gathered around to learn more about the doctrines of the neo-Nazis and to ask why some people are so motivated and consumed by hate. The residents of Grant County were eager to be more enlightened about the tragic consequences of prejudice and bigotry. Unintentionally, Mullet had caused a community to examine its core values and its renewed appreciation and support for social justice.

During the press conference, which followed the morning rally, task force members fielded questions from national, regional, and local media organizations. Some reporters asked about the potential reaction Paul Mullet and the neo-Nazis might have to the day's events. We predicted that the neo-Nazis would look elsewhere for a home, which later proved to be the case. The press conference also provided the opportunity for the people across America to learn about how the Grant County residents effectively responded to this neo-Nazi attempt to invade their community, a response that could be a model for other communities facing similar situations.

We held a private session with twenty leaders representing a broad cross section of the community. Members of law enforcement, elected officials, educators, youth, ranchers, homemakers, the faith community, the publisher and editor of the *Blue Mountain Eagle*, Democratic and Republican Party representatives, and the business community took part in the meeting. It concluded with a public announcement proclaiming the formation of the Grant County Human Rights Coalition with John Day's mayor serving as the interim chair. The newly formed coalition proposed goals and strategies to promote human rights. In addition, hundreds of green ribbons showing support for human rights were distributed for people to wear and display in storefront windows, on automobiles, in other public

venues, and at the evening rally. That afternoon, the city of John Day became a sea of green.

Following the strategy meeting, we witnessed a large crowd demonstrating against hate groups. The gathering represented all segments and regions of the county's population. It was a historical day in the lives of the Grant County and city of John Day residents. In fact, by one count, nearly 40 percent of Grant County's 7,500 residents participated in the events by either attending the two rallies or streaming the events to their homes. (Williams and Callister tallied the total number of people attending the two unity rallies and the number of viewers who followed the rallies on the *Blue Mountain Eagle* computer streaming of the events.)

One of the most important lessons learned in the Grant County story was the unique role played by the publisher and editor of the local weekly newspaper. Their decision to not only run the story but to rally and organize the community against the threat of the neo-Nazis required wisdom, courage, and commitment to the people of the community they serve, made the newspaper a powerful tool in discouraging hate. As a result of their role in combating the neo-Nazi threat, the staff of the *Blue Mountain Eagle* received an award from the Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon in 2010. Subsequently, in April 2011, the Kootenai County Task Force on Human Relations presented one of its 2010 Civil Rights Awards to the newspaper. Marris Williams, publisher of the *Blue Mountain Eagle*, was chosen in April 2011 as one of the top twenty-five newspaper publishers under the age of thirty-five in the United States by *Editor and Publisher* magazine. Scotta Callister later wrote that the awards were accepted by the newspaper staff on behalf of the people of Grant County for their courage and commitment to stand up for the values of freedom, equality, and justice as well as their rejection of a message of hate.

Coeur d'Alene, Idaho

During the summer of 2010, members of the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) located in Topeka, Kansas, announced that its members would travel to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, and protest North Idaho College's stage production of the *Laramie Project*, a play about the reaction to the murder of gay

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student Matthew Shephard in Wyoming. Further, members of the church had identified several other protest sites in Coeur d'Alene, including the city's two high schools. In addition, several locations in Spokane, Washington, were targeted for demonstrations. As was historically the case, local communities in northern Idaho called on the task force to give guidance in how best to respond. Based on past experiences with similar threats from hate groups, the task force began exploring alternative strategies to address this challenge. The substance of the plan was grounded in two key longtime task force tenets: (1) We would not remain silent in the face of hate; and (2) The plan or program would not include a face-to-face confrontation with the demonstrators. The decision to avoid direct confrontation was based on the principle that alternative activities and events must be scheduled where the task force can control the agenda, including the tenor and spirit of the messages. This tactic follows a very similar approach employed by the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Martin Luther King Jr. and his followers never attended or confronted the Ku Klux Klan at a Klan rally or cross burning. King believed it was never wise to allow the opposition to set the day, time, and agenda for an encounter. When one allows the peddlers of hate to determine the location and agenda, one is simply being reactive. In addition, those encounters often result in unbridled anger from both sides, making it difficult to unite in a setting where the human spirit can be uplifted through the celebration and promotion of human dignity.

When Dr. King planned a march, the Ku Klux Klan and other racist groups were often present to disrupt the event. Dr. King remained in command of the agenda and event. Using similar policies, the task force proceeded to develop and plan a separate event coinciding with the church members' protest activities. It was decided that the most effective response would be a unity rally that included all the

constituencies in the region. It was also deemed important to pay tribute to those groups targeted by the hate-filled messages of the WBC. Further, it was determined to bestow special honors and attention on the lesbian-gay-bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, American soldiers and veterans, and civil rights heroes.

We purposely scheduled the unity rally immediately following the church protest. This gave the media an opportunity to attend both events, thereby maximizing the coverage of the unity rally. When the unity rally began, the WBC protestors had already left the campus. A capacity crowd of hundreds filled the main hall in the Human Rights Education Institute's center and the public parking lot. Audience members wore yellow ribbons to honor military men and women serving in the armed services, both in the past and present. Eighteen speakers from Idaho and Washington spoke in support of freedom, equality, and justice. The speakers represented all segments of the community, including labor, veterans, business, gender, ages, disability, elected local and state officials, the faith community, high school and college students, law enforcement, diversity in race-ethnic background, LGBT, K-12 and college/university educators, and socioeconomic differences. The task force hosted speakers and gathered written messages of support for diversity and human rights from the college and university presidents of Washington State University, the University of Idaho, Gonzaga University, Whitworth University, Eastern Washington University, Lewis-Clark State College, and North Idaho College. Like Grant County and the city of John Day, Oregon, this was yet another example of the inability of hate to penetrate a wall of unity for social justice and human rights in Spokane and Coeur d'Alene.

The Unity Rally drew coverage from a number of regional and local media. One long-time task force board member suggested the rally might have been the most moving and emotional event in the history of the task force. Many attendees donated money to North Idaho College's Gay and Straight Alliance Student Club. According to Stewart, WBC suffered a major defeat by bringing its hurtful message of hate to Spokane and Coeur d'Alene. The people of the Inland Northwest united in support of those individuals targeted by the church protesters, thus providing

unity within our various communities to counter the WBC's divisive message. This particular case study demonstrates how the political, economic, and cultural actors rallied to both condemn and isolate the messengers of hate.

The WBC's offensive and divisive message of publicly thanking God for the death of American soldiers and celebrating breast cancer angered all segments of the region's population. In fact, some civil rights leaders suggested that the church protesters' visit did more to convert individuals to support civil rights causes than all the efforts of local human rights activists and organizations on that given day.

Conclusion

These cases confirm our strong faith in the depth of the American people's commitment to protecting the democratic values of freedom, equality, and fairness. The people of Grant County and the Inland Northwest did not hesitate to stand up for their neighbors who were being targeted by the threat of intimidation, harassment, and discrimination fueled by hate groups. The communities were reminded of a valuable lesson about the dangers of bigotry and how to act swiftly in saying no to hate. The message is "leave my neighbors alone."

These two cases suggested that any community can succeed, if people remain vigilant and reject the idea that if hate is ignored, it will go away. The words of columnist Kathleen Parker, in the April 17, 2010, issue of the *Washington Post*, best support the actions taken by the people of the two communities in this study: "When you choose to remain silent, consider yourself complicit in whatever transpires." Finally, we believe that a community should set its own agenda in responding to the purveyors of hate. Creativity and commitment to ensure every human being is treated with dignity and respect are paramount for communities to triumph over the forces of hate. Although the task force has witnessed a number of unique strategies applied in the numerous communities that have sought the organization's advice, a common thread is uniting the political, economic, and social structures of the community to peacefully reject and isolate the message and activities of the hate groups.

The late Eva Lassman, a Holocaust survivor, presented us with the remedy to this historical human tragedy of violence perpetrated by some human beings on other members of the human race. In a letter to the editor, she wrote, "When we are able to instill in people a desire to respect and be tolerant of all humanity, we may eventually have peace. If not, we will continue to experience the inhumanity of war and terrorism, and the deaths of children and other innocent victims of violence" (p. A11).

Conclusion

In his book *Memorable Quotations of John Kennedy*, M. Meyersohn provides a quote that President Kennedy delivered before a joint session of the United States Congress on February 28, 1963, that is most applicable to the actions taken by the residents of the two communities in this study: "The cruel disease of discrimination knows no sectional or state boundaries. The continuing attack on this problem must be equally broad. It must be conducted at national, state and local levels; and it must include both legislative and executive action" (p. 185).

We hope the recounting of the case of Grant County and the case of the WBC represent affirming stories of what it means to value, respect, and celebrate each other. It is through these local acts of support for human rights that we provide a powerful antidote to hate in our communities, our nation, and the world. We leave these experiences with a renewed optimism for the future. It is our further hope that communities across this great land and internationally will apply similar acts of courage and determination in rejecting the evil doctrines of a past time, as Grant County and the people of Spokane and Coeur d'Alene did in the cases discussed.

Ours is a nation of constitutional guarantees that should extend to the protection of all persons regardless of race, color, national origin, religion, creed, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, or social and economic status. In addressing the Fourteenth Amendment, Justice William J. Brennan Jr. said:

Ours is a nation of many divergent groups. In one way or another each of us at some time

is a member of a “minority group.” But our differences can’t hide the fact that we are all Americans who live under a Constitution which is blind to any differences in our rights and privileges because of race, religion or national ancestry. In dispersing justice our courts ignore such differences. We must do the same in our everyday life [p. xiii].

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