

## HATE GROUPS PLOWING FERTILE FIELD ON WEB

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The most infamous white supremacist group in America, the Ku Klux Klan, counted at its peak as many as 4.5 million followers nationwide, largely an older membership anchored in the South.

But decades later, even as the ranks of white-hooded purveyors of hate have dwindled to as few as 4,000, a new crop of media-savvy, smooth-talking hate groups has moved in to mobilize American racists--especially alienated suburban youths.

Using hundreds of slick Web sites with enticing graphics and "teen pages," as well as tie-ins with hate-laced punk rock bands, these groups have trained their sights on a new market, experts say. One of those organizations is the East Peoria-based World Church of the Creator, which until recently counted alleged spree shooter Benjamin Smith among its members.

"They are targeting upper-middle-class kids who have a future," said Jordan Kessler, a hate group monitor at the Anti-Defamation League in New York.

And, as Smith's case shows, there is no shortage of such targets around Chicago--including its exclusive North Shore communities, where Smith was raised and graduated from New Trier Township High School.

"Communities like Wilmette (where Smith grew up) really have to organize to counter hatred," said Rev. David Osterdorf, director of the faith-based Center for New Community, an anti-racism group in Oak Park. "If they let it go, then it seeps deep and it results in the kind of tragedies that we had last weekend."

In particular, experts say, the hate groups target high school outcasts because such students may be loners looking for an identity. As many as a dozen hate groups currently have active recruiters working in the Chicago area, according to the ADL.

"These are not the Nazis that marched in Skokie," Kessler said of the brown-shirted platoon that wanted to tramp through the suburb a generation ago in defiance of the town's large Jewish population. "They have really taken off their hoods and put on neckties."

Like cults, the new groups cast themselves as a community of like-minded friends rather than fiery-talking rabble-rousers, experts say.

Moreover, where recruiters for hate groups once relied on stacks of mimeographed pamphlets and late-night cable access shows to establish an image, they now are finding it's as easy as setting up a Web page. Many sites tailor their layouts to specific audiences.

At various points, the World Church of the Creator site--inaccessible since Smith's alleged shooting rampage through Illinois and Indiana, which resulted in two deaths and nine injuries--has included pages devoted to women, as well as separate pages for kids and teens. Another hate group's site includes a question-and-answer column called Jeff's Advice, which purports to be staffed by a teenaged boy.

"They realize that people on the Internet, many of them are young, many of them are well-educated," Kessler said. "And those are obviously the people they are trying to reach."

That is a lesson not lost on World Church leader Matt Hale.

"For one thing, the people on the Internet generally tend to be a little brighter than the average person," Hale said in an interview Tuesday at his Downstate home and headquarters. "So we attract better people."

While Web sites are valuable tools for attracting attention from prospective members, experts say, it is often difficult for hate groups to turn that interest into commitment. For that, they rely on the computer equivalent of face-to-face contact: Many sites have direct links to their own on-line chat rooms, providing real-time forums.

"What they are getting there is the interactivity. Then you might start to get a little more interest that way," said David Goldman, director of HateWatch.org, a Cambridge, Mass.-based group that monitors the growth of hate activity on-line. "Even there, though, there can be problems to really get a hook into someone."

The growth of hate-laced Web sites has unfolded in step with the expansion of the Internet, beginning in 1995 with the appearance of the first major hate site, called Stormfront. Since then, similar sites--offering everything from snippets of racist philosophy to crossword puzzles for kids--have blossomed to some 250 major sites, Goldman said.

Another way that hate groups are targeting younger people is with music. In the past two years, the world of punk, Goth and industrial rock has been marked by the emergence of dozens of bands linked with hate groups and their members.

One band, Rahowa --shorthand for Racial Holy War--is headed by George Burdi, a Canadian man with ties to the World Church of the Creator, several experts said. Widely available on-line, its album is also sold in at least one northwest suburban store.

While it is unclear what tools have been most effective in recruiting hate group members on the North Shore, where many towns tout their diversity and openness, there is little doubt that groups have made inroads there.

In 1997, Patrick Langballe of Winnetka, a former New Trier student, was charged with hate crimes for allegedly spray-painting swastikas on a Northfield synagogue.

Officials also said Langballe had recruited New Trier students for a neo-Nazi group called the White War Commission.

"Part of what attracts (white supremacists) to this area is that it is predominantly white," said Pam Melick, a consultant on race issues in Wilmette. "That does not mean, however, that the area is receptive to it."

Holly Rodgers, a Winnetka mother of a New Trier student, said racism may find fertile ground in more subtle kinds of prejudice, such as character judgments based on the size of somebody's house or the make of their car.

"We all need to talk about this, and we need to help our children understand that you can tolerate differences," she said.

New Trier Principal Wesley Baumann said school officials cracked down on hate group activity following Langballe's arrest.

As for why he believed the North Shore might be an attractive target for such groups, Baumann said: "If you are recruiting for this particular issue or belief, you're not going to go into the inner city. You will go places where people want to protect what is already there."

Caption: GRAPHIC MAP

GRAPHIC (color): The World Church of the Creator Background Membership Recruiting Violent acts Sources: Anti-Defamation League, Center for New Community and Southern Poverty Law Center. Chicago Tribune - See microfilm for complete graphic. MAP (color): States with activists

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Correction: Additional material published July 14, 1999: Corrections and clarifications. In an article on the Benjamin Smith investigation July 6 and a related one July 7, Rev. David Ostendorf's name was misspelled. The Tribune regrets the errors.

Index Terms: PROBE ; CHICAGO ; ILLINOIS ; SHOOTING ; MURDER ; MULTIPLE ; GROUP ; VIOLENCE ETHNIC ; MINORITY ; SUBURB ; REACTION ; PROFILE ; STATISTIC ; TECHNOLOGY

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