

RENO JOINS INDIANA MOURNERS IN THEIR STAND AGAINST HATE

Chicago Tribune - July 13, 1999

Author: Amanda Beeler, Tribune Staff Writer. Tribune staff writers David Mendell, Eric Ferkenhoff and Rick Pearson in Chicago contributed to this report.

With the nation's top law enforcement official at center stage, this college town unified Monday evening to spread a message of tolerance eight days after a student was slain in the name of hatred.

People of myriad races and religions overflowed the 1,400-seat Musical Arts Center at Indiana University for a somber memorial service in honor of Won-Joon Yoon, 26, the Korean doctoral student killed in the recent shooting rampage in Illinois and Indiana. Authorities believe the shootings, which targeted minorities, were committed by avowed white supremacist Benjamin Smith, 21, a Wilmette native.

Throughout the event, community, state and national leaders wondered aloud why one young man should feel such bitter hatred toward another, if only because his skin color and nationality were different.

"This event tonight should be a time to renew our efforts to eliminate intolerance, bigotry and hatred from this land and country," said U.S. Atty. Gen. Janet Reno. "We could stand by and let grief overwhelm us, but we can't let it overcome our resolve to heal the divisions within society."

The U.S. Department of Justice is considering whether to investigate the World Church of the Creator, the East Peoria-based white supremacist group of which Smith had been a member. Investigators are looking at possible links between the church and the violence, which left two dead and nine injured.

Clad in everything from casual clothing to fine suits, attendees stepped into the Arts Center lobby and were handed white ribbons at the door. The hundreds of people who could not find seats watched the service on television in the lobby or stood on the lawn outside and listened to loudspeakers.

Reno praised the local community for coming together in a time of despair, but she also advocated more stringent gun control and hate-crime laws.

"Let us resolve tonight to go forth from here and let our actions speak of peaceful action and peaceful ways," Reno said.

After Reno's address, Yoon's father, Shin Ho Yoon, clapped and told Reno: "Thank you, thank you."

A cousin of Yoon's, SeungHo Park, carried Yoon's Bible and glasses, which Yoon himself had carried and worn when he was shot July 4 before entering services at Bloomington's Korean United Methodist Church.

"We believe that Benjamin Smith is not a lone individual, but a symbol of an evil spirit that still resides in American society," Park told the crowd through an interpreter. "People who say he was in the wrong place at the wrong time--how can we say the church is the wrong place and the Sunday service the wrong time?"

After the two-hour service, participants carrying lit candles walked six blocks from the Arts Center to Yoon's church for further prayers.

Before the event, Bloomington and IU leaders still were pondering how the slaying could have been prevented. Smith, after all, was so well known in the community for

distributing hate literature that 500 residents held a march to protest his actions last November.

"I know there is more that we could have done" to prevent the shooting, said Pamela Freeman, IU's assistant dean of students, who co-chairs the school's Racial Incidents Team. "Intellectually, I can tell myself we did everything, but emotionally, I want to find more."

The gathering Monday evening was sponsored by Bloomington United, a group formed by community leaders to combat the anti-Semitic and anti-minority literature that Smith had spread.

Federal authorities also are investigating whether the World Church of the Creator or its members are linked with a series of arsons at Sacramento-area synagogues and the murder of a gay couple nearby.

More than a dozen white-power activists in that community, including several from the World Church, have been interviewed, Pete Urrea, an agent with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, said Monday.

Illinois Atty. Gen. Jim Ryan said Monday his office likely will make a decision before week's end on whether it will file a lawsuit against the group. Ryan said his office is considering a suit because the group has not registered as a charity or a business but has solicited money from members and for merchandise.

A spokeswoman for the Illinois Department of Revenue said Monday that its review of the group's tax-exempt status could take several weeks.

Matthew Hale , the church's leader, scoffed at the investigations.

"It's laughable," Hale said. "We'd be more than happy to prove to the whole world and perhaps the people on the moon that we are a church."

Asked about the shootings, Gov. George Ryan said Monday his hate-crime panel, formed earlier this year, would hold its first meet Wednesday. Still, he said he is uncertain what his commission can recommend.

"I don't know how you legislate against hate," Ryan said.

In developments regarding the Smith investigation, ballistics tests have matched casings or bullets from crime scenes in Chicago, Springfield, Urbana, Decatur, Skokie and Northbrook to weapons found with Smith, an investigator said Monday. Bullets from the Bloomington, Ind., crime scene were delivered to the Illinois State Police Crime Laboratory on Monday.

Smith killed himself late on July 4, police said.

Edition: CHICAGO SPORTS FINAL

Section: NEWS

Page: 1

Index Terms: INDIANA ; GROUP ; MEETING ; VICTIM ; FAMILY ; FEDERAL ; OFFICIAL ; QUOTE ETHNIC ; VIOLENCE ; CRIME ; CHICAGO ; ILLINOIS ; REACTION

Dateline: BLOOMINGTON, Ind.

Record Number: CTR9907130063

Copyright 1999, Chicago Tribune