

NEWS Civil Rights Caravan

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Civil rights activists and religious leaders today gathered at a Skokie church to begin a three-day trip that will retrace white supremacist Benjamin Smith's shooting spree three weeks ago.

That July 4th weekend rampage, which began on Chicago's North Side and led Smith downstate and into Bloomington, Ind., claimed the lives of former Northwestern University basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong and Won Joon-Yoon, a Korean student attending Indiana University. Smith also wounded nine people.

He took his own life during a struggle with police in downstate Illinois.

Today, the protesters who gathered at St. Joan of Arc Catholic Church said they would lead a car caravan of about 11 people from Byrdsong's Skokie home to other shooting sites, including Decatur and Springfield.

Later today, they planned to hold a silent vigil outside the home of Matthew Hale, leader of a white-power organization called the World Church of the Creator, and a former friend of Smith's. The U.S. Justice Department is investigating whether Hale or any World Church members knew of Smith's plan to go on a shooting spree targeting blacks, Asians and Orthodox Jews.

"The blood of these people is on the hands of Matt Hale and always will be ...

We cannot ever forget that," Rev. David Ostendorf of the Center for New Community, an Oak Park-based activist group, said at today's launching of the trip.

One participant, Rev. David Anderson, the executive director of the Illinois Conference of Churches, said people must continue to speak out against racist violence.

"The religious community is declaring that silence only serves to fan the flame of racial violence," he said.

Others, including Illinois State Rep. Jeffrey Schoenberg (D-Evanston), said the trip was about people of various faiths uniting for a cause.

"The Old Testament teaches us justice, justice -- you should pursue justice," Schoenberg said. "Today is a perfect example of how we are collectively seeking justice."

Schoenberg, who is not joining the group's caravan, said current hate-crime legislation in Illinois needs to be strengthened. On Wednesday, a group of House Democrats proposed a law that would broaden the definition of a hate crime and give prosecutors greater latitude in pursuing those who commit racially motivated crimes.

Since the shooting of Byrdsong, a group of Skokie residents have met every night at 8 p.m. near his family's home for walks intended to unify the community.

Residents today spoke of the healing nature of the nightly walks, which they said unite people of various backgrounds who might not otherwise interact.

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