

## HUNDREDS LEARN WAYS TO COUNTER HATE GROUPS - CONFERENCE ATTENDEES URGED TO TAKE A STAND

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Sherialyn Byrdsong and Catherine Matthews might never have met if not for white supremacist Benjamin Nathaniel Smith's deadly shooting spree last 4th of July weekend.

Before taking his own life, Smith took the lives of Byrdsong's husband, Ricky, the former Northwestern University basketball coach, and Matthews' boyfriend, Won Joon Soon, a Korean graduate student at Indiana University in Bloomington.

On Friday, in a panel discussion, the two women talked about how they have responded to the tragedies. It was part of Building Democracy 2000, a two-day conference at the Ramada Plaza Hotel O'Hare in Rosemont to discuss what people and communities can do to counter hate groups and their activities.

In the eight months since Smith's killing spree, Byrdsong said she frequently has been asked about her response to his "journey of hate."

"It's really hard to put into words. I've been asked that question many, many times. And my response has been, 'To try to do all that I can,' " she said.

Matthews, a doctoral student in higher education in Bloomington, said Smith stripped Soon of his humanity; she intends to restore it.

"He's more of a symbol now. I intend to put his face with his person, to give him back his human dignity," Matthews said.

The conference, at which more than 200 participants learned about hate groups, their ideologies and how to recognize them, was sponsored by the Oak Park-based Center for New Community, which tracks hate groups in the Midwest.

A 15-minute documentary, "Continuing the Journey Against Hate," was shown, featuring speeches from organizers of a three-day march held three weeks after the killings, retracing Smith's path.

A recurring theme of Friday's conference was the tactics hate groups use to attract new members, particularly young ones, and finance their operations.

The conference opened with "Soundtracks to the White Revolution," which looked at how "white-power music" is being sold and distributed over the Internet and in some record stores.

"They're moving on the youth culture in general," said Justin Massa of the Center for New Community. "If we care about youth, we have to care about white-power music."

Catchy rhythms with wild guitar licks and drumbeats frame shocking lyrics that espouse hatred and violence toward Jews, people of color and homosexuals.

Matt Saternus, a sophomore at Rolling Meadows High School, said white-power music has filtered into popular music genres, such as the punk scene.

"We don't want it there," said Saternus, who attended a recent concert in Chicago at which a white-power band was unwittingly scheduled.

Students from high schools and colleges in Illinois, Missouri, Ohio and Indiana attended the conference. Massa encouraged youths to talk to their parents about the music they listen to. He urged parents to educate themselves by checking the center's Web site, [www.newcomm.org](http://www.newcomm.org), which lists known white-power bands, as well as anti-racist bands.

David Ostendorf, director of Center for New Community, said the conference was intended to teach people how to take a stand against hate groups operating in their communities.

For example, East Peoria, Ill., organized a rally against Matthew Hale and his World Church of the Creator, which is headquartered there and had counted Smith among its followers.

In a workshop called "State of the Hate 2000," Devin Burghart, director of Building Democracy 2000, talked about how some white-supremacist groups have used their own interpretations of the Bible and the U.S. Constitution to justify their hate.

Burghart called the Christian Identity movement--which teaches that white people are the true children of God, Jews are the spawn of Satan and blacks have no soul--"the theological glue that binds the white-supremacist movement in the United States."

Floyd Cochran, a former white supremacist who was the keynote speaker at Friday night's banquet, said that the religious ties were the hardest to cut after he left the Aryan Nation compound in Idaho in 1992.

"I'd broken that spiritual connection with God," said Cochran, 43, founder of the Education and Vigilance Network in Moshannon, Pa., an information and research center on hate groups. "I don't belong to any organized religion (now). I felt I was manipulated by people who used the Bible. When I got into the Aryan Nation, I could tell myself I don't hate because I want to, I hate because God wants me to."

Cochran, who said he has been called "the biggest race traitor in the world," was recruited by the Ku Klux Klan when he was 14 years old. He had just read the book that would become a road map for the next 20 years of his life--"The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich."

Cochran, a small, skinny teenager who had been sent away by his father to live in foster homes at age 11, was fascinated by Adolf Hitler's ascent to power. He began receiving racist literature and talking to recruiters for the Klan in rural, upstate New York.

But it was not a book or the Klan that taught the young Cochran how to be a racist, he said. He learned to hate Jews, blacks and homosexuals from adults in the many foster homes where he lived, and from some of the teachers at his all-white country school.

"Some of the things the Klan said to me when I was 14 didn't have much to do with hate. They made a personal appeal: 'Don't you want to be somebody? We want to make you a man.'"

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