

local news

Facing hate

Groups around the country gathered to watch a video on hate incidents—a group in Eugene got more than it bargained for

by Inga Sorensen

Every once in a while, an alarming situation can prove fortuitous. At least that's what Michele Lefkowitz is hoping. "There were about 15 to 20 skinheads who showed up to our screening of *Not in Our Town*," says Lefkowitz, who is involved with Communities Against Hate, a five-year-old human rights organization in Eugene. "We were not expecting that to happen. Clearly they were there to intimidate others, and I think they were effective to some degree."

Not in Our Town, a half-hour documentary that recently aired on Oregon Public Broadcasting, tells the story about how residents in Billings, Mont., responded to white supremacists when hate incidents were escalating in their community three years ago. Fliers from the Ku Klux Klan had been distributed; the local Jewish cemetery was desecrated; skinheads intimidated African American churchgoers; and during Hanukkah, bricks were thrown through windows displaying menorahs.

Billings Police Chief Wayne Inman—who was a member of the Portland Police Bureau when Ethiopian student Mulugeta Seraw was murdered by skinheads in Portland in 1988—urged citizens to take immediate action against the white supremacists in Billings. And it was a plea they heeded: the Painters Union formed a volunteer work force to paint over racist graffiti; religious groups from multiple denominations sponsored marches and candlelight vigils; and the local newspaper, the *Billings Gazette*, printed full-page images of menorahs that in turn were displayed in the windows of nearly 10,000 homes and businesses.

That story of community response was so inspiring to filmmakers Patrice O'Neill and Rhian Miller of the California Working Group that they decided to make a documentary about the transforming event.

Not surprisingly, the *Not in Our Town* video has been touted as an effective organizing tool to encourage average citizens to get involved in the fight to combat hate crimes and harassment spawned from prejudice. It is, in fact, the crown jewel of a national campaign that carries the same name and goals.

"We were aware of the Billings case and have used it as a reference point about how to get everyday folks involved in the effort to stem the rising tide of intolerance and hate crimes," says Kelley Weigel, field network coordinator for the Rural Organizing Project, which has helped launch dozens of local human rights groups across small-town and rural

Oregon. "The story is so powerful because the whole community got involved. It is an incredible account."

The documentary aired throughout December and January on public television stations nationwide. Educational events such as town halls and community forums were held in conjunction with those broadcasts.

In Oregon, the week of Jan. 1-7 was declared "Not in Our Town Week." Community screenings of the video were sponsored statewide, as activists

united to increase public awareness about hate crimes and to encourage communities to find solutions to the growing threat of intolerance.

In Lane County, Lefkowitz and other activists organized a community screening and discussion at the Eugene Water and Electric Building. Details of the event were publicized beforehand in the local newspaper, and organizers expected about 90 people to attend.

Instead, says Lefkowitz, "well over 200" people arrived, including several local public figures such as the mayor, police chief, and Oregon state lawmakers Cynthia Wooten and Peter Sorensen. More than a dozen people who are believed to be associated with the Eugene-based racist skinhead organization Aryan Pride and a national neo-Nazi group called the Northern Hammerskins also showed up.

"They came in looking pretty tough and stood along the wall," says Lefkowitz, who was admittedly shocked by their arrival. "I think it was unnerving to many of us."

She says the group stayed and watched the screening with the rest of the audience, and participated in the discussion afterward.

"They were saying things like they just wanted to celebrate the white race," says Lefkowitz, adding that while no physical violence occurred, it was "an intense experience."

"What made it so intense is that all of these people were forced to face the reality of the skinheads," she says. "It's one thing to read about skinheads or hate crimes, it's another thing to come face to face with them—especially if you've never done that before or you're not expecting it."

Jonathan Mozzochi is the executive director of the Portland-based Coalition for Human Dignity, which monitors white supremacist and neo-Nazi activity.

Though Mozzochi was not on hand in Eugene, he says he has viewed a videotape of the happenings.

"Those were big guys who showed up," he says. "Part of skinheads' power lies in their ability to strike fear into people and create a threatening atmosphere. Let's face it, they know what reasonable people will think when they see them. It will be very unsettling at the very least. That's their intent."

Mozzochi adds that it is critical that the public take skinheads and neo-Nazis seriously.

"I've been told that some people there were saying that these were basically good young guys

who simply lacked a recreational outlet. I'm here to tell you that not only are a lot of the guys not young, they also don't grow out of it."

According to federal crime statistics, 5,852 hate crime incidents were reported during 1994. However, hate crime reporting is voluntary, with only a little more than half of the law enforcement agencies in the country participating. In addition, it is widely believed that hate crimes are vastly underreported.

"Not in Our Town Week" organizers released a rundown of documented accounts of hate crimes in the United States that occurred during the first two weeks of November 1995 alone.

They include an incident at Penn State University in which swastikas and the letters "KKK" were painted on the doors of African American and Jewish students' rooms; an incident in Novato, Calif., where an Asian man was stabbed with a hunting knife numerous times by an attacker who reportedly said he singled out the victim because of his race; and a case where felony hate crime charges were filed against a carpenter who admitted he raped an Amish girl and fired gun shots at a horse and buggy out of anger toward the Amish.

Closer to home, some in Oregon believe hate

played a crucial role in the December murders of Roxanne Ellis and Michelle Abdill, a lesbian couple in Medford who were very visible in gay and lesbian rights issues. And many blamed a hostile climate created by the anti-gay Ballot Measure 9 for the 1992 fire-bombing deaths of an African American lesbian and a disabled gay man in Salem who died after skinheads tossed a Molotov cocktail through the window of their home.

"These people are dangerous," says Mozzochi. "If you think they are showing up at these types of events just to talk—and will eventually change their ways—you will be sorely disappointed."

Nevertheless, Lefkowitz hopes the experience will act as a catalyst with respect to activating average citizens.

"I hope this experience will bring home to these folks the reality that this community has a problem with skinheads and hate activities. I hope they'll now get involved," she says.

That too is the hope of ROP's Kelley Weigel.

"We'd really like to make sure that this isn't just a splashy media event," she says. "One of our goals during these community gatherings was to talk about where we go from here, about the steps we can take.... One of the wonderful things about this campaign is that it is directed at everyday folks rather than activists. We have to try and sustain that interest and involvement."

Deirdre Atkinson, Oregon's project coordinator for "Not in Our Town Week," estimates that as many as 800 people actively participated in the week's events, while many more watched the documentary from their homes.

She says that aside from Eugene, she has heard of no other touchy situations occurring. Atkinson adds she is extremely pleased by the response from people of all ages and backgrounds. She says several public service announcements about Not in Our Town activities aired on local radio stations including Portland's KNRK, an alternative music station that caters to a twentysomething crowd.

"I was really excited by the fact that we got a lot of positive calls from people who are Generation X and younger who wanted to know how they could get involved," she says. "This has been a very inspiring experience."

She adds she had no problem getting members of the gay, lesbian and bisexual communities to speak at Not in Our Town forums and panels.

"I think we did so well in Oregon because we have such an incredible network of human rights activists already in place," Atkinson says, crediting organizations such as Rural Organizing Project and Basic Rights Oregon, the successor organization to the No on 13 campaign. "That's something to be proud of."

Not in Our Town videos are available upon request from the California Working Group at (510) 547-8484. The cost to individuals is \$25 (add \$4 for shipping), which includes a 16-page curriculum guide.



ILLUSTRATION BY JAN FAUST



PACIFIC
GUARANTEE
MORTGAGE
CORP

THE BEST RATES
THE BEST SERVICE
THE QUICKEST RESPONSE
GUARANTEED

246-LOAN(5626)

Experience...
Integrity...Reliability

WE REPLACE WINDOWS

Now you can replace your old windows with new vinyl custom fit insulated windows. Your new windows will keep your home warmer in winter, cooler in summer, reduce condensation and sound proof your home. We also have storm windows and doors.

20 years of experience in the same location makes us one of Portland's most experienced window companies.

Visit our showroom or call today for a courteous in-home estimate.

283-9481

INSULATED WINDOW
CORPORATION



Garland Horner
Owner

Oregon BB # 19095
8124 N. Denver