

DENNERT, from page 9

This is the hair that the neo-Nazis shaved off when, at the age of 14, she drank too much at a party and passed out. When she woke, she found tufts of hair in her underwear and her friends trying to wash neo-Nazi graffiti, swastikas and the letters VAM and BSS from her body. They didn't want her to have to see them.

I asked Dennert where the adults were when this happened and whether she told her parents.

"I was ashamed," she said. "I just couldn't tell them. I tried saying some stuff, but I didn't get a good reaction. Nobody was listening. That's how it was then. Everyone knew who the guys were and said, 'Oh, they're just like that'. And everyone just went along with it. There were swastikas all over the neighborhood."

Her parents tried to alleviate the situation by asking her to change her behavior. "I couldn't see how to do that," she said sighing. "I mean, this is how I look; this is how I am. I speak out about things. Even now, we've never talked about it – not with my family or with my friends. It still feels like something that it's impossible to talk about."

It's hard to avoid the link between Dennert's experiences as a teenager and her mission today – to create a world where there's a place for everyone. "Back then, we could only deal with what was going on. We had to put up with loads of shit," she said. "We couldn't escape; there was nobody else to hang out with. We were just there, and we just had to suffer."

Today, she's tired. There's so much more to do. The process of launching #jagärhär outside Sweden is underway, but it's a lot of work. Everyone who wants to join the group has their Facebook account reviewed, to avoid admitting trolls. Everyone needs Dennert to do something. This isn't a job that has an eight-hour working day. A missed train on the way to a talk in Tierp on her birthday was enough to leave her in tears on the platform.

Keeping up an online presence is a 24/7 job and it's hard to switch off. But Dennert is proud. She believes that #jagärhär has achieved change, and that personal attacks and the amount of hate and threats posted online has decreased.

One thing that has increased, however, is the spreading of rumors, fake news and instances of people twisting the truth. Members are called terrorists by their opponents and some of them are victimized by having their addresses, telephone numbers and personal information exposed online. Strangers ring up their children and families at all hours of the day and night. "It's one thing to attack those of us who represent the group. But members' kids? That's so low," Dennert said, as we stand together on the escalator in the Swedish Exhibition and Congress Centre.

September 2017 was a month of crisis management, marching neo-Nazis and the Gothenburg Book Fair. The extreme right-wing newspaper Nya Tider has a stand just a few meters from #jagärhär's. Nya Tider's much-discussed presence resulted in authors and publishers boycotting the fair. But Dennert nodded toward their stand in the corner and said, "They've been over and said hello and we've talked a bit."

Despite all that she's been through, Dennert is happier now. She is more open and is braver. She said that #jagärhär has made her ashamed of her own prejudices. She has also seen the most unexpected people stand up against sexism and for feminism. Her former boyfriend, the one who was radicalized and who spread her love

letter all over school, congratulated her for winning the Anna Lindh Prize. The honor is an annual prize awarded to someone fighting injustice and protecting human rights, which was set up in honor of Anna Lindh, a prominent Swedish politician who was assassinated in 2003.

"Everyone handled the situation when I was a teenager differently," Dennert said. "They didn't understand. But maybe I wasn't as alone as I felt. Before, I often saw racism in the things other people did and I took on the role of victim. I felt powerless and saw

conspiracies everywhere.

One rule in the #jagärhär group is not to interpret things. If you're not sure what someone means, ask: 'Have I understood you correctly?' Doing this creates a dialogue instead of polarization."

"We aren't politically united," Dennert said, when I ask her about what distinguishes #jagärhär from a left-wing or right-wing movement. "We aren't actually united on almost anything. The only thing we agree on is that we must discuss politics and social issues in a sensible way. We must respect human rights and not discriminate against anyone." She also views #jagärhär as being a tool useful for maintaining a living democracy. "We can't have the right to vote if we don't accept the responsibility to find out the facts – otherwise, we might as well just live in a dictatorship. Think of Brexit! The day after the vote, people were Googling it to find out what it was, not to find out what was going to happen next! They'd voted without knowing what they were voting for."

At the moment, Dennert's life consists of #jagärhär. So much is happening so quickly and, at the same time, there's so much still to do. It's frustrating and she asks herself if she'll ever become someone with normal hobbies like gardening or motocross. "But I have actually done something else: I've dealt with a major nuisance," she said and smiled. "And, I think, I've perhaps taken back control of my life."

*Translated from Swedish by Jane Davis
Courtesy of Street Roots' sister paper Faktum / INSP.ngo*



PHOTO BY MARIO PRIAT OCH AORTA