

1995 TO NOW

Bellingham's York Neighborhood fights back

by Paul de Armond

August 8, 2000 -- The York neighborhood in Bellingham, Washington, has a reputation for being feisty. Once known as "Snoose Hill," York is one of the older residential neighborhoods in this northwest Washington city. Close to downtown, schools, parks, and Western Washington University, York Is home to families, university students, and retirees. Nelson's Market, a landmark where residents shop and socialize, recently celebrated its 100th anniversary.

In mid 1995, York's tranquility was marred by the establishment of a skinhead house in the 1300 block of Grant Street. Several young neo-Nazi men and women moved into a rental operated by Lakeway Realty. The skinheads had a mission: promoting their twisted version of white supremacy. The house became a mini-hotel for other racists passing through the area. There were loud, drunken parties that spilled onto the sidewalk, vandalism featuring hate slogans, displays of swastikas and Confederate flags, and swaggering attempts at intimidation and obnoxious behavior.

The neighborhood seethed but bided its time. The police were contacted about the vandalism, but since it was a sneak-crime there wasn't sufficient evidence for an arrest. Jason LaRue was cited for fourth-degree assault stemming from an incident on August 8th. Tensions mounted. The skinheads were a bad taste in everybody's mouth, but they were going to have to cross the line before they could be reined in.

On Friday, November 3, 1995, the line was crossed. Three students were leaving a party in the 1400 block of Grant. They walked south across Potter Street to where their truck was parked—in front of the skinhead house. On the sidewalk and in the street, the skinheads were drinking and being obnoxious. Corey Baker, who happens to be perceived as black, noticed some damage to his truck. The skinheads attacked Corey, breaking a beer bottle against his head and shattering his cheekbone. This began a riot that lasted nearly an hour. One skinhead chased Carolyn Dawson, who happens to be perceived as white, because she was with Corey. The third student, Scott Schultz, who happens to be perceived as Asian, witnessed the attacks but fended off the skinheads.

Approximately twenty angry students advanced up Grant Street, intent on settling some skinhead hash. The police were called but declined to show up immediately. For the next half hour, a running series of fights continued sporadically. Dawson Banner, the skinhead who was later convicted of attacking Corey Baker, hid in the house after getting beaten. Jason LaRue, later convicted as one of Banner's accomplices, was lying unconscious in the street.

Cordelia Dollar, one of the neo-Nazi women, loaded the remaining skinheads into her car and began driving wildly through the neighborhood. She returned to Grant Street, where she intentionally ran down Scott Schultz. Schultz was thrown completely over the car. Dollar then backed up towards him; the skinheads in the car got out and attacked some of the students, as well as kicking Schultz as he lay in

the street. At this point, a single Bellingham policeman finally arrived. Dollar fled the scene, driving to Oregon with the other fugitives. The others in her car escaped and were never charged for their role in the assaults and riot. They remain at large. Banner Dawson and Jason LaRue were arrested and taken to jail.

In the aftermath, the city and Western Washington University were convulsed with outrage. A federal team from the Department of Justice's Community Relations Division participated in a mass meeting between student leaders, university officials, and law enforcement. WWU President Karen Morse, who had been aggressively promoting minority enrollment, was suddenly confronted with the ugly fact that racism was a threat to the safety of students. A special meeting was held by City and University officials to reassure parents that all possible steps were being taken.

WWU's Ethnic Student Center, the Whatcom Human Rights Task Force, and other community groups organized a march to show opposition to racism. Hundreds of people turned out. The march began at the Fred Meyer parking lot, went through the York neighborhood, and then up to the WWU campus.

In early December, the Task Force organized public meetings around the national "Not in Our Town" campaign, which told the story of how Billings, Montana, fought back against neo-Nazi terrorism. As part of the "Not in Our Town" campaign, people in the community wanted to keep working on upholding liberty in and around Whatcom County. A group of mothers approached the Task Force with an idea. They wanted to duplicate the methods used in Billings—particularly the public display of a symbol showing support for a free and safe society. This group would later gain national recognition as "The Nine Mothers of Bellingham" for their role in erecting a moral barrier against hate.

In Billings, the chosen symbol was a menorah. After skinhead terrorism escalated to the point where children were attacked in their homes, the city got behind a program to show that the people being targeted had the full support and protection of the community behind them. The local paper, the *Billings Gazette*, volunteered to print a half-page color picture of a menorah, which people could post in their windows. The menorah was chosen because of an attack in which a chunk of concrete was hurled through the bedroom window of a 4-year-old boy. The family was Jewish, and it was believed that the picture of a menorah which the boy had placed in his window was related to the motive for the crime. It is very common for skinhead gangs to spread hate literature, commit vandalism, terrorize young children and their mothers, and attack people when they are alone.

As in Bellingham, the skinhead terrorism slowly escalated until serious crimes of violence were the issue. The earlier attacks were not met with indifference, but it took a period of several months before Billings realized that they were in a fight with some very high stakes. Billings, like Bellingham, rallied to the fight. All over the city, the menorah posters from the *Billings Gazette* appeared in windows. The message was clear: "Not in Our Town."

In Whatcom County, the skinhead attack in the York neighborhood produced a similar success, though by a much rockier road. The *Bellingham Herald*—a Gannet-chain newspaper, unlike Billings's family-owned *Gazette*—declined to play a role in opposing bigotry. Instead, the *Herald* ran an editorial by Ellen

Korthias which took the bizarre position that hate crimes and domestic terrorism were deserving of First Amendment protection. Undeterred, the Nine Mothers and the Human Rights Task Force produced window posters, stickers, and buttons with the slogan “Joining Hands against Hate.”



The “Joining Hands” posters appeared all over Whatcom County. They declare a “hate-free” zone and offer assistance to anyone who might be targeted by racist terrorism or cultural intolerance. The posters and stickers in car windows instantly became a visible sign that Whatcom County was committed to defending essential freedoms and was willing to fight to prove it. Five years later, thousands of these symbols have been distributed and can be seen in every part of the region. There was a brief flurry of opposition from local hate groups and the apostles of intolerance, but it quickly became clear that tactics of intimidation and fear would not prevail. The campaign which started with some mothers having coffee is still operating five years later.

While the “Not in Our Town” and “Joining Hands” campaigns were going on the prosecution moved towards trial. Cordelia Dollar was traced to Oregon, arrested, and brought back for trial. The other skinheads vanished underground. The charges against Banner Dawson and Jason LaRue for assaulting Scott Schultz were dropped for lack of sufficient evidence, and the trial focused on the initial attack on Corey Baker. Dawson was charged with second-degree assault and malicious harassment. LaRue was charged with malicious harassment. Both pleaded not guilty.

In the course of gathering evidence for the prosecution, a warrant was served on the skinheads’ house, and a search was performed by Bellingham police accompanied by Whatcom Sheriff’s deputies and FBI agents. The search uncovered significant quantities of hate literature, Nazi and racist paraphernalia, and correspondence between the skinheads and racist leaders such as Richard Butler of Aryan Nations which showed that the skinheads were organizing racist activities throughout a sizable area. Ultimately, this evidence was barred from the trial because it could not be shown that it specifically related to the attack on Corey Baker.

Cordelia Dollar bargained her case down to a lesser charge of felony hit-and-run, in exchange for a guilty plea and promise of cooperation as a witness. Ultimately, she did not testify at the trial. She was sentenced to serve four months in jail and pay costs and restitution. After her release from jail, Dollar failed to make any payments. She later jumped probation and disappeared. In June 1998, an arrest warrant was issued for probation violation. She has not been seen since.

In some of the pretrial documents, Jason LaRue is listed as a witness against Banner Dawson. This suggests that LaRue implicated Dawson in statements to police immediately after his arrest. However, at the trial, LaRue was not listed among the prosecution witnesses.

The trial began at the end of February and lasted less than two weeks. Dawson and LaRue’s defense was that they had no part in the assault and that all of the alleged crimes were committed by the skinheads who fled in Cordelia Dollar’s car.

The jury deliberated for seven hours, once requesting Judge Steven Mura to clarify the definition of “accomplice.” At the end of the deliberations, the jury found the defendants guilty on all charges. At the sentencing, Judge Mura castigated the two for their actions, which he said fostered fear and hatred in the community. “You are entitled to your thoughts, but you cannot carry out those thoughts,” he said. Dawson was sentenced to 18 months in prison for second-degree assault and malicious harassment. LaRue was sentenced to 9 months in the county jail.

While serving his sentence, LaRue requested he be allowed hate literature from the World Church of the Creator (WCOTC) and a copy of Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* as reading material. This kind of material is usually barred from jails and prisons. The World Church of the Creator is a violently racist organization which masquerades behind a false claim of religious protection. The organization had self-destructed after the 1993 suicide of founder Ben Klassen. In May 1996, Matt Hale consolidated control of the defunct organization and began to revive it. Part of this revival was the production and distribution of the literature LaRue wanted introduced into the Whatcom County jail. Sheriff Dale Brandland allowed both the Creator literature and *Mein Kampf* on religious grounds. LaRue pursued his “religious” studies and emerged from jail a more committed hatemonger than when he entered.

After his release from jail, LaRue made several appearances in the York neighborhood to let people know that he was back. He moved to Lynnwood and became a leader in the WCOTC. In July 1999, he participated in a nationally coordinated effort by the WCOTC to spread hate literature in celebration of the murder-suicide spree by fellow Creator Ben Smith, which left eight injured and three dead, including Smith who committed suicide when finally cornered by police. In November 1999, LaRue organized a “Marty’s Day” celebration at Whidbey Island where Robert Mathews, leader of the Order, was killed in a shoot-out with the FBI.

On July 16, 2000, the *Bellingham Herald* published a profile on LaRue and his recent activities. On the same night that the story went to press, WCOTC hate literature bearing LaRue’s Lynnwood address was scattered over several blocks of the York neighborhood. On July 31, LaRue was seen driving through the neighborhood with two other men.

The York Neighborhood Association with the assistance of the Whatcom Human Rights Task Force, has distributed flyers about these incidents and is exploring other actions to guarantee the peace and safety of the neighborhood.

What Is Malicious Harassment?

Malicious harassment is a class C felony. Usually referred to as a “hate crime,” malicious harassment is defined as any attack or threat of attack against persons or property which can be proved beyond a reasonable doubt to be motivated by the perpetrator’s bias against the victim’s race, religion, sexual orientation, or handicap.

If the offense is a threat, it must be shown to be a credible threat which would cause a reasonable person to fear harm. Mere words alone do not constitute malicious harassment; there must be an element of violence in the acts.

It is a difficult crime to prosecute, since the prosecution must prove beyond reasonable doubt the perpetrator’s state of mind and intentions, as well as the acts themselves.

It is also a provision of the law that evidence of any expressions or associations of the accused may not be introduced in evidence unless it specifically relates to the crime. This provision eliminates the possibility of charges being based solely on the fact that the accused is an active bigot or hater.