

Gunman's views earned him notoriety on campus - 'He wanted to make a name for himself'

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Last July 4, Benjamin Nathaniel Smith strolled along the tree-lined streets of Bloomington, tucking hundreds of racist leaflets onto car windshields and under doors.

A year later, police said, he charged through the same college town with a gun, killing a Korean student during a two-state shooting spree that also left a black man dead in Illinois. Late Sunday, when much of the country had its attention turned to fireworks and barbecues, the 21-year-old Smith was dead.

What happened to him between the two holidays was, according to those who knew him, a horrible culmination of racist outrage that had been building for years. Perhaps even when he was growing up in an upscale Chicago suburb.

At times, Smith shaved his skull, skinhead style, and he had his chest tattooed with the words "Sabbath Breaker."

A year ago, he was made a "brother" of the World Church of the Creator, an avowedly white supremacist group based in East Peoria, Ill. Its leader, Matt Hale, has been denied a law license by the Illinois bar because of his racist preachings.

Smith apparently found acceptance in the group, whose members greet each other with the acronym "Rahowa," which stands for "Racial Holy War."

Smith's habit of littering the Indiana University campus in Bloomington with racist leaflets had become notorious at the school of about 30,000 students, which Smith attended in 1998 before dropping out. He had been a criminal justice major.

Fellow Indiana student Tyrese Alexander, who is black, said Smith's racist views were so well-known at the school that he brought them up for discussion in his African-American studies classes.

"He just had an angry look on his face," said Alexander, 23.

At first, a few Indiana students started writing letters to the campus newspaper complaining of Smith's propaganda. Smith responded with his own letters signed under the pseudonym "August Smith."

"White Nationalists have no desire to rule over other races; instead we want separation from nonwhites. This is why White Nationalists are working for an independent white nation," he wrote on June 11, 1998.

By the fall, the trickle of complaints about the leaflets had become a protest march of hundreds of people through the center of town, said Jeffrey Willsey, one of the event's organizers.

Smith was unbowed, but possibly humbled, too, Willsey said. Smith, whom police say was seldom seen with anyone else, stood on a corner and watched the marchers pass, holding a sign that read, "No Hate Speech Means No Free Speech."

"Here we are as a community coming together, and here's this poor guy standing out there all by himself, entirely alone," Willsey said. "I thought, this is a really pathetic human being."

Late last year, Smith wrote another letter to the Indiana Daily Student newspaper. "America," he said, "has become increasingly nonwhite and the constitutional rights of racial activists have increasingly been infringed upon."

In April, Smith appeared as a witness for Hale at a hearing before a bar association panel. He said that at times he had "considered violent acts to achieve racial goals, but Hale counseled me to act peacefully."

"Our No. 1 goal is to straighten out the white man's thinking," he said. "We're the new minority being crushed left and right. We're in a life and death struggle."

That struggle apparently boiled over last weekend. Police said Smith apparently targeted minorities, killing two and wounding at least eight others before fatally shooting himself late Sunday.

One of Smith's ex-girlfriends seemed unsurprised by his violent end.

"The things he was doing were not working -- distributing pamphlets and things. It wasn't stirring up news or making headlines," said Elizabeth Sahr. "He wanted to make a name for himself, to show people that this could be done if you wanted to do it."

She added: "This was the Fourth of July. This was his freedom day from the government."

Caption: Photo: mug of Benjamin Nathaniel Smith

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