

THE MAKING OF A RACIST

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Author: Kirsten Scharnberg, Evan Osnos and David Mendell, Tribune Staff Writers. Tribune staff writers Eric Ferkenhoff and Todd Lightly contributed to this report. On a warm spring morning last year, Benjamin Nathaniel Smith walked to his car and found a scrap of paper pinned beneath his windshield wiper.

The flier touted a bold movement called the World Church of the Creator. There was a number to call. The man who answered the phone was an Illinois native who identified himself as Pontifex Maximus Matthew F. Hale.

A troubled young man just beginning to hate, Smith agreed to meet the leader of one of the fastest-growing white supremacist groups for dinner that night in Champaign.

At a corner table, they ate.

They quietly talked.

And right there, in a booth at the local Bob Evans, Ben Smith finally found what he had spent his whole life searching for: an accepting friend, a disciplined doctrine, a crusade he believed would change the world.

In the three weeks since the 21-year-old Wilmette native embarked on a murderous 4th of July rampage directed at Jews, Asians and African-Americans, people everywhere have wondered how a philosophical, affluent and intelligent young man became so filled with anger and malice.

For Ben Smith, there likely was not one defining moment, but dozens of them. There apparently was not one anger-provoking trigger, but several.

A review of public records and dozens of interviews have begun to paint a clearer portrait of who this young man truly was. Almost everyone who spoke with the Tribune eventually settled on the same conclusion: Smith's story is in his long and frenzied search. And, in the end, his story is as much in what he found as in what he didn't.

He didn't find God, but he happened upon the White Man's Bible.

He didn't find an organization that would mend a society, but he tapped into a hate-propelled movement that would shock a nation.

He didn't find an intimate circle of good friends, but he discovered a man who fed his rage and a group that fostered his hate.

At one point, in the middle of that first dinner, Smith asked, "What does it all boil down to?"

Hale said he replied with his standard line: "There is a Golden Rule. What is good for the white race is good. What is bad for the white race is bad."

After that statement, Hale studied his newest potential convert from across the table and tried to gauge his reaction.

In Smith's clean-cut face there was no outrage, no hesitation, no doubt, Hale said. The B-average college student who would brutally snap a little more than a year later met Hale's gaze squarely.

According to Hale, Smith nodded in agreement and calmly asked, "Can we use violence?"

The search begins

Smith grew up in a seemingly typical suburban setting: mother, father, two younger brothers, two-car garage, three golden retrievers.

His mother, Beverly, was a lawyer, high-end real estate agent and once a member of Wilmette's board of trustees.

His father, Kenneth, was a physician in internal medicine at Northwestern Memorial Hospital who left his 19-year practice in 1996 to sell real estate.

Smith's family repeatedly has declined interview requests. Nor have they spoken publicly about their son's crimes or suicide.

The Smiths were often the talk of their upscale Wilmette neighborhood because they seemed to lack any desire to get to know their neighbors. Neighbors say Kenneth Smith wouldn't acknowledge someone waving to him and was rarely seen interacting with his eldest son, Benjamin.

As a youngster, Ben Smith would play in his family's yard with a crossbow, once shooting arrows into a neighbor's gray plank fence.

"My wife lived in fear of him," former neighbor Jack Heitman said last week. "She thought he had an evil core, and we both worried about our daughter's safety when he was around. He lived on the fringe and didn't fit in."

At New Trier Township High School, a North Shore public school with a national reputation for excellence, Smith often confided to one of his teachers that he was not close to his family. He felt alone.

Smith--who told friends his family had never been churchgoers--declared himself a Muslim for a time, according to friends. But if God was meant to fill a void for the young man, he apparently was disappointed in the results. His conversion didn't last, and by the time he graduated, he had a tattoo on his chest that read, "Sabbath Breaker."

The teacher, who asked that his name not be used, sensed Smith was searching for a human connection and would invite Smith to his home after school to sometimes watch movies with him and his wife.

"It is inconceivable to me that Ben was anti-Semitic in high school," said the teacher, who is Jewish.

At New Trier, Smith was exposed to the white supremacist movement. According to the Anti-Defamation League, Smith's former classmate--high school dropout Patrick

Langballe--was attempting at that time to recruit students for a white power group. While Smith and Langballe later became friends, there is no evidence the two knew each other while Smith was in high school.

If Smith was heading down a road of anti-Semitism and racism, he never confided in his best friend, Scott Dubin, who is Jewish, or his high school girlfriend, who was Korean.

Those who say they knew Smith best say they never would have predicted he would one day drive through the Midwest shooting the very types of people he had once befriended.

"He must have changed a lot," Dubin said sadly in the days following the murders of former Northwestern University basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong and Indiana University doctoral student Won-Joon Yoon.

Smith began to use drugs during his final two years of high school, according to several of his friends. And a judge once ordered him to seek drug counselling, court records show. He also was becoming violent and had his first of many encounters with law enforcement, according to public records.

In 1995, at a shop in the Old Orchard Mall in Skokie, Smith got into a dispute with a clerk. When police arrived, he fought with an officer, according to Skokie police reports.

He was charged with two counts of battery, resisting arrest and disorderly conduct. He later pleaded guilty to two misdemeanor battery charges, and the other charges were dropped. Smith was placed on one year of supervision and ordered to seek drug counselling.

When he graduated in 1996, Smith was a teenager careening out of control. He was clearly looking for a place to belong, likely was exposed to hate groups and showed signs of violence.

No one yet knew how those three things would collide.

'Just a regular guy'

In the fall of 1996, Smith and Chicago native Luke Muzyka were assigned as roommates at the University of Illinois. The two were exact opposites on one hand, philosophical soul mates on the other.

They became friends over long, late-night talks in their cluttered dorm room. With the passion of 18-year-olds, they debated politics and religion, foreign policy and the American legal system. They almost always disagreed, but were smart, opinionated and obsessively well-read.

According to Muzyka, Smith wasn't openly racist but would often couch his arguments in intellectual terms, such as, "Marx was totally wrong to think that all revolutions are a struggle of classes--really they are a struggle of races."

"At first he was just a regular guy," Muzyka, 21, said last week, sitting in the kitchen of his family's home near Midway Airport. "But I guess you could say we witnessed the bulk of the whole transformation process."

Just a month into his first semester, Smith was stopped by campus police for peeking into the windows of an all-female residence hall. He identified himself to police as Erwin Rommel--the name of Hitler's most famous field marshal.

Later that night, two more women told police that the man identified as Rommel had rubbed his hand along their legs in a computer lab, records show.

That first year of college, Smith's circle of five best friends included a student from Nepal, one who was Jewish and another of Korean descent. All were political leftists. So was Smith.

Smith and Sandeep Gyawali, the young man from Nepal, were members of a student group called Students for Real Democracy, an organization whose mission was, in part, to "work for racial equality," Gyawali, 21, said last week.

Also that semester, Smith and Muzyka joined the liberal Student Environmental Action Coalition.

Smith dropped out of both organizations a few months later, beginning a trend his friends would come to recognize. Always paranoid that people were talking about him behind his back or conspiring against him, Smith would temporarily join one group after another, Muzyka said, and then bow out, telling his roommate, "I couldn't trust those people."

"He flirted around with the ideology of more groups than I can remember," Muzyka said. "He was always looking for something, but he could never seem to find it. I don't know that he ever even pinpointed exactly what he was searching for."

Smith's paranoia began to run so deep that he would enter his dorm room, see Muzyka studying and immediately issue an accusation: "You've been going through my stuff, haven't you?"

At first, Muzyka felt sorry for his friend. He often thought back to the day they had arrived at college. As Muzyka's own family hurried around making sure their son was comfortably settled, Muzyka recalled, Smith's father dropped him off at the dorm room with a pillow, some clothes and a goodbye.

As the semester wore on, Smith gradually began to change. He started drinking a lot, Smith's roommate said, and doing a number of drugs, including acid and psychedelic mushrooms. Another friend, Andy Freeman, 21, said Smith was also buying prescription anti-depressants and taking them by the dozens.

'I could kill'

Muzyka started to get most concerned when Smith put up a "tribute to the suicide kings" in the corner of the dorm room.

"It was an altar with the king of hearts--the king that has a sword through his head--surrounded by pictures of people who had killed themselves on drugs, like Jimi Hendrix and (John) Belushi," Muzyka said.

From there, things worsened. Rapidly.

Smith, once a reader of the Bible and the Koran who had earned a B taking the college's Jewish Practices class, turned his reading habits to new kinds of literature. He pored over "The Turner Diaries," a novel about race war and the overthrow of the U.S. government. One night as Smith sat reading Hitler's autobiography, he looked up about halfway through the thick text and said, "This guy did some admirable things."

One day Muzyka returned to the room to find Smith had been perusing an Aryan Nation home page on the Internet.

Stacks of spiral notebooks were next to Smith's bed, many with Smith's short stories. They had started benignly enough at the beginning of the year, but the writings turned to topics of race wars and murder, Muzyka recalled.

Finally, late one night as they sat talking in their room, Smith turned to his roommate and made a chilling confession: "I think I could kill someone. I don't think it would bother me at all."

As the school year drew to a close, Smith began to hang some of his racist writings up in the dorms. Records show that authorities were concerned enough to include some of them in Smith's campus police file.

The written rantings, which would continue during Smith's sophomore year, included cryptic graphics and appeared under the pseudonym Joshua Manson. One eerily foreshadowed what was to come:

"If you think you can kill a man, and then escape, and go back to life as usual, you're kidding yourself. Once you take a man's life, you are until the end of your days, a wanted man. And as such, you must constantly live in fear. . . . If you know they're going to arrest you, are you going to go with them . . . to be interrogated, beaten, and raped, or are you going to defy them until your last breath, and take your own life?"

One-man protest

If Smith was exhibiting quiet hints of racist leanings and violent tendencies as a freshman, his sophomore year left little room for doubt.

Still close with the same group of five friends but assigned to live with an African-American student in the dorm, Smith's personality changed even more.

His drug and alcohol use continued, friends say. The racist writings became more overt, and his violent outbursts became more frequent, records show.

Smith talked openly about his penchant for revolution, visiting any Web site that encouraged bucking authority or social norms. He even seemed to accept his new roommate for a while after they had a lively discussion about the Black Panthers, his former roommate Muzyka said.

On the evening of Oct. 15, 1997, Smith exploded so violently that even his best friends would not forgive him. He severely beat his girlfriend, Elizabeth Sahr, an Oak Lawn native who was also a U. of I. student, after seeing her on campus with another man, records show.

According to campus police reports, Smith ripped Sahr's necklace from her throat, hit her repeatedly in the face, threw her against a wall, choked her, punched her in the stomach and struck her across the face with a belt.

Smith's friends virtually ousted him from their circle, leaving him alone. His relationship with his African-American roommate had deteriorated so badly that they moved to separate dorms.

Smith continued to harass Sahr, records show, calling and e-mailing frequently, until she finally filed for an order of protection.

The university, fed up with Smith's pattern of arrests, began to consider expelling him. Before he could be kicked out, Smith withdrew and left Champaign. It was the last time his former best friends ever saw him.

"He was just totally lost to us," Freeman said.

In 1998, Smith enrolled at Indiana University in Bloomington, majoring first in English and then criminal justice. For the first time, he wore his racism and rage on his sleeve.

He began distributing hate literature bearing his name and organized a one-man protest against Bloomington United, a group of 500 Bloomington citizens who had gathered solely to march against Smith's flier campaign. Smith stood alone holding a placard that read: "No hate speech means no free speech."

Smith apparently had few friends during these months. He tried to establish his own hate group, but it faltered when he futilely struggled to recruit other members.

So that spring, when Smith found literature from the World Church of the Creator tucked under his car's wiper blade, he made the call.

In short order, he signed on to Hale's cause. Smith was so aggressive in recruiting and distributing fliers that spouted the group's hate-filled ideology that he was honored as "Creator of the Year."

If Smith's whole life had been a quest for the perfect fit, the World Church of the Creator seemed to be it.

Martyr for a cause

Months before his rampage and suicide, while testifying in support of Hale's petition for an Illinois law license before the Character and Fitness Committee of the 3rd Judicial Circuit, Smith said of Hale:

"He's given me spiritual guidance. . . . When I first met him, I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do with my life, what direction I was going to go."

Smith, an avid reader, may have found some of that direction in the White Man's Bible, a book that Hale advocates as must-reading for all of his converts. It carries this reminder about dedication to the cause: "Fight or Die."

According to investigators, Smith's friends would later tell them Smith had confided that he was willing to be "a martyr" during a race war.

Smith chose the 4th of July weekend to unleash his arsenal of hate. Loading up his 1994 light blue Ford Taurus with two guns, boxes of ammo and thousands of dollars in cash, he embarked on a two-state shooting spree in which two people were killed and nine injured.

As police closed in near Downstate Salem, Smith turned a gun on himself rather than face arrest.

Hale and his group, the one refuge where Smith felt he had finally been accepted, quickly distanced themselves from Smith. Initially, Hale said he scarcely knew Smith. He later conceded they had seen each other just days before the rampage.

Months before Smith's violent death on a country road, he told Beverly Peterson, an Ohio-based documentary filmmaker, that his beliefs had cost him friends and family members.

"It's also made me a stronger person, I guess. Really, I mean, if you're not willing to stand up for your beliefs, life is just not worth living."

Caption: PHOTOS 2

PHOTO (color): Benjamin Smith grew up affluent and socially fragile. He graduated from high school with knowledge of hate groups, drugs and violence. When he joined Matthew Hale's white supremacist group, he found the perfect fit; a place to belong and a license to hate. AP photo. PHOTO (color): Liz Sahr, an ex-girlfriend of Benjamin Smith, is shown burning a photo during a 1998 candlelight vigil against violence at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Smith assaulted Sahr, according to campus police. Daily Illini photo by Chuck Cass.

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